

Sunday Sermon
October 15, 2017
“We Strive to Live Faithful Lives”
Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-10

Introduction:

The people of Israel are in exile. King Nebuchadnezzar has destroyed their land, and everyone strong enough to make the journey to faraway Babylon has been moved there. The people figure there is no way they will ever see their land again or have their homes or their nation or their temple back. They have no future, no hope. They are in essence dead.

With them in exile is a prophet named Ezekiel. God give Ezekiel a vision. God shows him a valley filled with dried out, sun-bleached dead bones. It is a metaphor for the people, of course. They feel bare, dried out, cut off from God. God asks Ezekiel, “Can these dead, dry bones live?” And Ezekiel has a great response. “You are asking me? You are God.”

And God says: “Tell my people that I will put breath to you and you will live. I’ll attach sinews to you, put meat on your bones, cover you with skin, and breathe life into you. I’ll dig up your graves and bring you out alive, because you are my people!” God has the power to restore their lives, and they will live, Ezekiel is told, if they will just be faithful.

I.

Over two hundred and twenty years ago, a hopeful group of individuals gathered in this county to form a Presbyterian church. God’s Spirit breathed on that group and gave them life. Through two hundred twenty years of good times and bad, celebrations and setbacks, affirmations and confirmations, times of plenty and times of want, God has breathed and this church has lived.

Those founders in our faith about whom we read in Hebrews, those founders in our faith about whom we read in the history of this church, they had to learn how to breathe as Christ’s church. And it took discipline and sacrifices. At times no doubt they felt they had little breath left in them. But by God’s faithful promise, they endured, they committed, and they gave in order to be who God was calling them to be.

II.

In our own lives, there are times when we are disappointed, hurt, discouraged, disillusioned. We are in exile, feeling bare, dried out, separated from God, wondering if we are going to live. But somehow we keep going and life continues. How? Because God fills us with breath. Nephesh is the word in Hebrew—God’s breathing

Spirit, breathing into us.

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.

Most times we have to learn how to breathe that Spirit, and we have to practice it. Singers, public speakers, athletes have to learn how to breathe to get the air they need. We have to learn to breathe as a church.

II.

I took some time off this week to spend with my grandchildren on their fall break. Our 9th grade granddaughter had been assigned a book to read, so we read it together, *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury, a classic written in 1953. Many of us were assigned that book to read in school.

The novel presents a future American society where books are outlawed. They have lost their value because of short attention spans. The government takes advantage of this and uses mass media to manipulate facts and truth. “Firemen” burn books that are found, along with the homes in which they are found.

The main character in the story, one of these firemen, secretly keeps some books, reads them, and realizes they have value and they offer other pictures of truth. He defects from his job and leaves the city to join exiled book lovers who are living in the countryside. There they watch as nuclear weapons are dropped by their country’s enemies and the city is annihilated. The story seems futile, hopeless. And yet in the face of such hopelessness, one of the drifters, an exiled college professor, says one day the war will end, and books will be written again. People will be called in to recite what they remember, and we will set it up in type until another Dark Age, when we might have to do it over again. But that is the wonderful thing about humankind, he says. We never get so discouraged or disgusted that we give up doing it, because we know it is important and worth the doing.

A little later he shares the story of a bird called a Phoenix who every few hundred years built a pyre and burned himself up. He must have been first cousin to humans, the man says, because that is what we keep doing. Yet every time the Phoenix burned himself up, he sprang out of the ashes and got himself born all over again.

Conclusion:

Sometimes it may feel like this church is dying. You have buried some strong leaders and supporters. But you are not dying.

Some of the ways in which you have been the church are dying, replaced by new ways, but the church is not dying. God is breathing new life into you. Even now you are being reborn, Christ’s body in the world experiencing re-birth and

reformation.

220 years and something close to 30 pastors, counting senior pastors and associates, and God is not finished breathing life into you. You will live, and you will not just survive; you will thrive. God will send more people to be a part of this family, God will send a new pastor, and God will amaze you with the missions and ministries that will happen here, things you could never dream up in committee meetings.

“Can these dry bones live?”

“You’re asking us, God? We don’t know.”

And God says, “I am going to dig you out of any grave you are in. I will put breath of life to you, and you are going to live.”

But for that to happen, we need to exercise some deep breathing. Deep breathing of God’s Spirit in us. I do not know exactly what these breathing exercises look like, but I am pretty sure commitment is involved.

Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses . . . we strive to live faithful lives. And like those forerunners in the faith, we do it through disciplined, sacrificial commitment of our time, our talents and our tithe, the pledging of the financial resources that are needed.

If this church is going to succeed in answering God’s calling, it will be through the committed giving of everyone.

Breathe on me breath of God.

“Till I am wholly Thine

Until this earthly part of me

Glows with your fire divine. Amen.