

SCRIPTURE READING FOR DECEMBER 12, 2021 @ CAPC OAKLAND

Ezekiel 37:1-14
COMMON ENGLISH BIBLE

¹ The Lord's power overcame me, and while I was in the Lord's spirit, he led me out and set me down in the middle of a certain valley. It was full of bones. ² He led me through them all around, and I saw that there were a great many of them on the valley floor, and they were very dry.

³ He asked me, "Human one, can these bones live again?" I said, "Lord God, only you know."

⁴ He said to me, "Prophesy over these bones, and say to them, Dry bones, hear the Lord's word!" ⁵ The Lord God proclaims to these bones: I am about to put *breath* in you, and you will live again. ⁶ I will put sinews on you, place flesh on you, and cover you with skin. When I put *breath* in you, and you come to life, you will know that I am the Lord."

⁷ I prophesied just as I was commanded. There was a great noise as I was prophesying, then a great quaking, and the bones came together, bone by bone. ⁸ When I looked, suddenly there were sinews on them. The flesh appeared, and then they were covered over with skin. But there was still no breath in them.

⁹ He said to me, "Prophesy to the breath; prophesy, human one! Say to the *breath*, The Lord God proclaims: Come from the four winds, *breath*! Breathe into these dead bodies and let them live."

¹⁰ I prophesied just as he commanded me. When the *breath* entered them, they came to life and stood on their feet, an extraordinarily large company.

¹¹ He said to me, "Human one, these bones are the entire house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope has perished. We are completely finished.'" ¹² So now, prophesy and say to them, The Lord God proclaims: I'm opening your graves! I will raise you up from your graves, my people, and I will bring you to Israel's fertile land. ¹³ You will know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves and raise you up from your graves, my people. ¹⁴ I will put **my breath** in you, and you will live. I will plant you on your fertile land, and you will know that I am the Lord. I've spoken, and I will do it. This is what the Lord says."

LANGUAGE NOTES & TEXTUAL CONNECTIONS

The prophet Ezekiel is a master at dealing with catastrophe. When it strikes a person's world can fall apart. In the face of such defeat we often choose denial or despair. When catastrophe struck in the 6th century BCE, when Babylon invaded Israel, denial was the popular response. Ezekiel found himself living among a people of God who seeing what was right before their eyes chose denial and/or despair. Ezekiel showed them that there was catastrophe, unavoidable, but God *was* at work in the catastrophe, sovereignly *using* the catastrophe to bring about something else.

Our reading today of Ezekiel's prophetic poems and visions is perhaps the most well-known: a vision of life from death, new beginnings from defeat and catastrophe – a rejection of the denial and despair that would move those whose worlds' have fallen apart – to give up. This is what God is up to – even as the people are exiled, defeated, giving up. *Adapted from text written by Eugene Peterson in The Message Bible translation.*

breath in both Hebrew (**ruah**) & Greek (**pneumos**) (the languages in which the Bible is written) the same word means breath (as in from our mouth) and Spirit (as at the center of our being and as God's presence). It's that same breath that God breathed into the shaped dust to bring about life in Genesis 2:7 "the Lord God formed the human from the topsoil of the fertile land and blew *life's breath* into his nostrils." In the text notice how it changes to **my breath** in verse 14. What's that about?

Zephaniah 3:14-20
COMMON ENGLISH BIBLE

¹⁴ Sing aloud, O daughter Zion;
shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart,

O daughter Jerusalem!

¹⁵ The Lord has taken away the judgments against you,
he has turned away your enemies.

The king of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst;
you shall fear disaster no more.

¹⁶ On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem:
Do not fear, O Zion;
do not let your hands grow weak.

¹⁷ The Lord, your God, is in your midst,
a warrior who gives victory;
he will rejoice over you with gladness,
he will renew you in his love;
he will exult over you with loud singing

¹⁸ as on a day of festival.

I will remove disaster from you,
so that you will not bear reproach for it.

¹⁹ I will deal with all your oppressors at that time.
And I will save the lame
and gather the outcast,
and I will change their shame into praise
and renown in all the earth.

²⁰ *At that time I will bring you home,
at the time when I gather you;*
for I will make you renowned and praised
among all the peoples of the earth,
when I restore your fortunes
before your eyes, says the Lord.

Luke 3:7-18
COMMON ENGLISH BIBLE

⁷ Then John [the Baptizer] said to the crowds who came to be **baptized** by him, "You children of snakes! Who warned you to escape from the angry judgment that is coming soon?" ⁸ Produce fruit that shows *you have changed your hearts and lives*. And don't even think about saying to yourselves, Abraham is our father. I tell you that God is

LANGUAGE NOTES & TEXTUAL CONNECTIONS

Zephaniah is the name of several people in the Hebrew Bible and Jewish Tanakh; the most prominent one being the prophet who prophesied in the days of Josiah, king of Judah (640–609 BC). In his prophetic poetry he reminds the people of God of the interconnectedness and intersectionality of life. While it's easy to think that our spiritual life is something personal between God and us; Zephaniah reminds us that "Everything you do or think or feel has to do with God. Every person you meet has to do with God." In our vast world of interconnectedness, interdependence and connections, everything is of consequence and impacts others. All of those consequences come together in God. That coming together of these consequences is called "Judgement Day" or "the Day of LORD" in biblical expressions. The prophet warns the leaders and the people that there are consequences for their actions of injustice, unfaithfulness, spiritual and moral corruption. They are invited to turn back to God.

We read the most oft read portion of Zephaniah today. Often associated with Christmas and read during Advent, it is a reminder that when often move from the wonder of childhood and "innocence" to a more self-induced fear and anxiety as we age, live and suffer through the hard times of life. But in the face of this the prophet reminds us that God tell the people, "Don't be afraid...Don't despair. Your GOD is present among us. (Verses 16-17). This reassurance doesn't result in fear's absence, but rather its transformation into fear of the Lord. *Adapted from text written by Eugene Peterson in The Message Bible translation.*

Luke is one of the four writers who recount the life, teachings and experience of Jesus of Nazareth. Of those four only Luke and Matthew tell the story of the birth of Jesus in detail. In doing so they situated Jesus in relationship from the beginning – with God, with Mary and Joseph, and also with John the Baptizer, his cousin, who would prepare his way with a ministry of prophetic and apocalyptic preaching, calling the people to repentance, changed lives and to recreate a society rooted in just living and economic activity.

able to raise up Abraham's children from these stones.⁹ The ax is already at the root of the trees. Therefore, every tree that doesn't produce good fruit will be chopped down and tossed into the fire."

¹⁰ The *crowds* asked him, "What then should we do?"

¹¹ He answered, "Whoever has two shirts must share with the one who has none, and whoever has food must do the same."

¹² Even *tax collectors* came to be baptized. They said to him, "Teacher, what should we do?"

¹³ He replied, "Collect no more than you are authorized to collect."

¹⁴ *Soldiers* asked, "What about us? What should we do?" He answered, "Don't cheat or harass anyone, and be satisfied with your pay."

¹⁵ The people were filled with expectation, and everyone wondered whether John might be the Christ. ¹⁶ John replied to them all, "I **baptize** you with water, but the one who is more powerful than me is coming. I'm not worthy to loosen the strap of his sandals. He will **baptize** you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷ The shovel he uses to sift the wheat from the husks is in his hands. He will clean out his threshing area and bring the wheat into his barn. But he will burn the husks with a fire that can't be put out." ¹⁸ With many other words John appealed to them, proclaiming good news to the people.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION & EXAMEN:

- What engaged you, enraged you, or surprised you in these texts?
- Today's scriptures all address how we often choose denial or despair when we're faced with the catastrophe of our world falling apart – whether from outside forces or from the natural consequences of our actions in our interconnected world. Is there a situation or relationship in which you're currently choosing denial and/or despair because of your fear?
- How might God be inviting you to bear fruit, to change the way you love, live and relate (repent) in regards to your denial or despair?
- What invitation do you heard the Spirit of God speaking to you – or to us, as a church – to act, speak, be or change through this word of scripture?

LANGUAGE NOTES & TEXTUAL CONNECTIONS

baptized means to wash something by submerging it, applied to people it means a cleansing and also a sort of death by drowning...it's a ritual that embodies new life from death, a new start, a sign of a changed heart – life as a new creation.

you have changed your hearts and lives:: the original wording here is *repentance* [**metanoia** in Greek] which means to turn around 180 degrees, recognizing that you're headed in the wrong direction – and want to go in a new direction. It's less about feeling bad about oneself or contrite, than about a dynamic of changing one's heart, passions, priorities: life.

In the text, John addresses a diverse gathering who respond differently:

1. The *crowds* – seem to be those who have more clothing and food than they need. They are exhorted to share with those who lack sufficient clothing and food. They represent the rich who do not carry out their responsibility to care for the poor.
2. The *tax collectors* – are a classic category of outcasts in Luke's gospel, typically paired with a generic group identified as "sinners." They are invited to be honest in their dealings with their neighbors...think of the story of Zacchaeus in Luke 19:1-10.
3. The *soldiers* – most likely Roman soldiers like the centurion Cornelius, the first Gentile convert (Acts 10-11). They represent the Gentiles – those who are not Jewish – that they too will be included in what God is about to do and should live accordingly rooted in God's justice.