

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

In the beginning, when God created man in His own image, he was formed from the dust of the ground. God the Potter had created perfection, the zenith of His creative work. God spoke, and there it was; "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth," so in His image He made him, male and female He created them. (Genesis 1:26-27) So, from the good earth was man formed; however, the lifeless clay form stood before Him. Therefore, God "breathed into His nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being." (Genesis 2:7)

In the days of the Patriarchs, catastrophe comes to Job as his family is taken from him, his livestock is stolen, and he is covered from head to foot in painful boils. He confesses that it is God who gives and takes away. (cf. Job 1:21) He asks his wife if we should accept only good from God and not adversity. (cf. Job 2:10) Four of His friends come to comfort him and do a poor job. Eventually, Elihu, Job's young and pretentious friend who speaks a pearl of wisdom from time to time, speaks to rebuke the other three friends. He then turns his attention to Job and says, "The Spirit of God has made me, And the breath of the Almighty gives me life." (Job 33:4)

The prophet Ezekiel is taken to a valley by the Spirit of YHWH and set in the midst of it, full of dry bones. "Son of man, can these bones live?" The prophet was commanded to prophesy to the bones to come together and live.

So I prophesied as I was commanded; and as I prophesied, there was a noise, and suddenly a rattling; and the bones came together, bone to bone. Indeed, as I looked, the sinews and the flesh came upon them, and the skin covered them over; but there was no breath in them. Also He said to me, "Prophecy to the breath, prophesy, son of man, and say to the breath, 'Thus says the Lord GOD: "Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they may live."'" So I prophesied as He commanded me, and breath came into them, and they lived, and stood upon their feet, an exceedingly great army. (Ezekiel 37:1-10)

Today's Old Testament reading ends with God declaring to His people,
Behold, O My people, I will open your graves and cause you to come up from your graves, and bring you into the land of Israel. Then you shall know that I am the LORD, when I have opened your graves, O My people, and brought you up from your graves. I will put My Spirit in you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land. Then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken it and performed it. (Ezekiel 37:12-14)

This is the work of the *ru'ach hiya*, the breath of life, and it is from God. God breathes into dead flesh, and it lives, even from the grave!

It's now the night of the Resurrection of Our Lord. Jesus' disciples are in the room with the doors locked. Word had gone out that Jesus was raised from the dead, despite Pilate's guard and the stone in front of the grave. The doors were locked for fear of the Jews; perhaps they thought themselves in danger of being accused of grave robbing. Into this locked room Jesus appears in the flesh. "Peace be with you," He says. Jesus shows them his hands and side; He still bears in His flesh the marks of the chastisement that brought them peace. (cf. Isaiah 53:5)

What does Jesus do then?

So Jesus said to them again, "Peace to you! As the Father has sent Me, I also send you." And when He had said this, He breathed on them, and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

Jesus breathes on them, sending them out to forgive sins! They now carry with them the breath of life of the Risen One to speak into their hearers that same breath of life for the forgiveness of sins.

Out they go, speaking the Word of God, speaking Jesus to whomever would hear them. They proclaimed Jesus the Christ and Him crucified for the forgiveness of sins. And wherever they went forgiving sins, those sins were indeed forgiven, as if Jesus Himself had given it to them, and as if God the Father Himself had said it to them. They were declared righteous for Christ's sake by His spokesmen in His stead.

They were given this promise, that just as Christ was risen from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so they also would walk in newness of life, a newness that would find its fulfillment ultimately in being raised from the dead on the Last Day to eternal life in the presence of the Father and His Christ. There, there will be no weeping nor gnashing of teeth. There, there is no more death and pain. There, there is the perfection that God had once created in the lifeless clay figure into which He breathed the breath of life. And all of this is because the breath of life was breathed into them by way of the Word proclaimed, by the giving and receiving of Jesus Christ crucified in Word and Sacrament.

Dear hearers, the same is true of you. Today, in your hearing, the Word of God is carried into your ears by the Spirit of God, on the breath of God, even as it is issued from my mouth on my breath. "Faith comes by hearing." (Romans 10:17) This is the Word of God, it is Spirit and it is Life. (cf. John 6:63) In the beginning, when God spoke, His words were carried on His breath, on His Spirit, and it happened; God said, "Let there be...", and there was. Today, in your hearing, the Word of God is spoken to you, "I forgive you all of your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost." And as this is the Word of God, it is carried to you by the Spirit of God, and it is so!

Apart from this Word of God, you are as dead as those dry bones. You are as dead as the clay form of Adam. You may be a living, breathing being, for you have in you the breath of life, but apart from the gracious Word of God that declares you righteous, you are lost in your trespasses and sins. It is God's Word and God's Word alone which gives to you the forgiveness of sins.

And where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation. Therefore, the Word of God—the proclamation of Jesus Christ crucified—is carried to you by the Spirit of God, by the breath of God, and it brings to you the forgiveness of your sins, and you are saved, and you have life. That is to say, you receive the breath of Life (capital L) and you live—on the Last Day, your grave will be opened and you will come up out of your grave, alive, because YHWH will have spoken it and performed it.

Apart from the Word of God is to be lost trespasses and sins; this is to reject the Word of God, to refuse to hear the Word of God, and one remains as dead, dry bones. Nevertheless, in those cases, the Word of God still holds sway, and it is so. This would be the second part of what Jesus told His disciples: "If you retain the sins of any, they are retained." The retention of sins is a serious thing, not to be done or taken lightly. It is the word of judgment against sin. Sin kills, and your sin kills you if it is retained to you. Why would your sin be retained to you? Because, as Dr. Normal Nagel once preached, "If we prefer to keep our sins with us, that's where they stay." That is to say, your sins are retained to you because you reject the Word of God that declares to you Jesus Christ crucified for the forgiveness of your sins.

Sin kills, and your sin killed the Son of God. There, on the cross, Jesus died with all sins and evil desires. There, Jesus gave His life as your ransom, taking your Death that you may retain the breath of life, even after death.

But, being in very nature God, death could not contain Him. On the third day, He rose again to life, conquering death. And He who is the Life of all the living, breathes on His disciples and says, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

Today, in your hearing, the Word of God is fulfilled, and it is God who does it! You have heard the Holy Absolution, and life is given to you, eternal life which is yours by way of your baptism into Jesus' death and resurrection. You have received the breath of God by faith for the sake of Christ—the Spirit of God is placed in you, and you have life. It is yours by way of God and Him alone, by grace alone, through faith alone; therefore, you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.