

Breath of Hope

When we find ourselves in the depths of trouble, it can be difficult to imagine how we might ever feel alive again. Today's readings remind us that God's Spirit gives life and hope – to the dry bones in the valley, to a family whose brother has died, to anyone who is in despair. We trust in God's power to forgive and restore, to breathe new hope into our dry bones.

Focus scripture: Ezekiel 37:1–14

During this Season of Lent, we are exploring readings from the Hebrew Scriptures that tell of God's saving acts throughout Hebrew history. This week the texts call us to explore the themes of exile and restoration.

The prophet Ezekiel is led by God to a valley full of dry bones. The Hebrew word for "valley" here indicates a wide plain, such as might be found in Babylon where Ezekiel and many of the leaders of Israel had been taken as exiles in 597 BCE. Perhaps the reference to "these slain" in verse 9 means that Ezekiel is looking at an old battlefield.

The phrase "dry bones" is found elsewhere in scripture as a metaphor for spiritual desolation. These bones are "cut off" or separated, within the power of death. Who can bring hope to them? When Ezekiel prophesies to the bones that God is the one who will give them life, the bones come together. But they do not live until God's breath comes upon them. The Hebrew word for "breath" here also can be translated as "wind" or "spirit." As in the creation story of Genesis 2, a human being does not live until God breathes upon her or him. The encouraging message from Ezekiel: God is the source of life.

Scholar Walter Brueggemann describes Israel's experience as "always on the move from land to landlessness, from landlessness to land, from life to death, from death to life" (*The Land: Place as Gift, Promise and Challenge in Biblical Faith*, Augsburg Fortress, 1977). Ezekiel's vision is part of that movement. Through Ezekiel's vision the people are given hope that they will be restored – they will return home and God's Spirit will breathe new life and hope into them. This can only happen because Yahweh is a God who creates, who brings forth, and who raises up.

The community, though still in exile, is called to look in hope to the restoration that will be. God's people will move from death to life, and God's Spirit will live within them.

The community of **Psalm 130** is encouraged to wait for God with eager hope, knowing that God is steadfast in love. The psalm is the cry of one immersed in the depths of despair. The psalmist describes the human condition as one conscious of sin and far from God. But God's nature is to forgive. God's people can persevere, confident that God has power to save.

Just as Ezekiel's vision is a breath of hope for the Hebrew exiles, so in **John 11:1–45** new life and hope emerge as Jesus calls Lazarus forth from the dead. Lazarus is unbound. The purpose of this event, Jesus says, is to reveal God's glory. But this raising comes at a cost, for it is the news of this event that precipitates Jesus' own death. Much has been made historically of Peter's confession of Jesus as Messiah (Matthew 16:16). In the intimate conversation between Jesus and Martha in verses 21–27, we hear Martha's equally powerful confession of faith – Jesus is the Messiah, now coming into the world. We live in the resurrection life now.

Paul continues the image of the life-giving Spirit of God. In **Romans 8:6–11**, he reminds us that we are now in the Spirit because God's Spirit lives in us.

• • • • •

God's Spirit – God's very breath of hope – fills our lives. God brings healing and restoration when we find ourselves in times of exile or separation. Where have you experienced the "valley of dry bones" in your own life? What message of hope sustained you in this difficult time? Who today might be in need of such a message of hope?



April 10, 2011

Focus Scripture
Ezekiel 37:1–14

Additional Scriptures
Psalm 130
Romans 8:6–11
John 11:1–45

Enlivening God, you bring life to dry bones and weary hearts. We cry out from the depths – help us! Pour your Spirit into our hearts so that, trusting in your power to forgive and restore, we may rejoice in the hope you set before us. Amen.

If you have Internet access, visit www.spiritseasons.com to access Spirit Sightings for connections between current events and the focus passage.

The Focus for Ages 5–12

A story like this one of Ezekiel's dream of the valley of dry bones will be greeted in a variety of ways by children between the ages of 5 and 12. Younger children often hear such stories and accept them as they do most stories. They wonder at the excitement and mystery of it, but their understanding of fact and fiction is not clearly defined. Older children, especially children with older siblings, may question the facts of the story. Remind them that Ezekiel is reporting this dream or vision. Encourage them

to wonder about its meaning and to explore God's message to the people. For all children, urge them to exercise their imagination as they explore this story.

The message of hope in Ezekiel's story ought not to be lost on the children. When they sense hope in the adults around them, they are able to accept a message of hope too.

Pray that the children in your group will rejoice in the hope found in Ezekiel's vision now and throughout their lives.

April 10, 2011



Materials needed

Before the session

- ❑ Prayerfully reflect on this week's focus scripture, Ezekiel 37:1–14, and biblical background material (p. 35). How does this story give you hope for the world today?
- ❑ Bring *basic supply kit* (see "This Season, So..." on p. 2) and, if possible, *Seasons Music CD, vol. 9* and *CD player*. *Seasons .mp3 Downloads* are available for purchase from www.spiritseasons.com.
- ❑ Bring songs "Hold Us in Your Grace" and "The Anointing" (pp. 5 and 6–7 in *Music Section*, also #11 and #5 on *Seasons Music CD*).

Gather

- ❑ Prepare worship table with *purple cloth, wide purple ribbon, votive candles, matches, offering basket, and Bible*. Place bookmark at Ezekiel.
- ❑ Display group response to *Lenten gathering litany* (p. 116).

Engage

- ❑ Prepare to tell the story on *today's resource sheet "New Life and Hope."*
- ❑ For sticks story group, bring *today's resource sheet "New Life and Hope"* and *craft sticks or dowels, two per child*.

- ❑ For Ezekiel research group, bring *copies of today's resource sheet "Who Was Ezekiel?" and directions* (p. 38).

Respond

- ❑ **Lent zone:** information about Lenten offering/project
- ❑ **Outreach zone:** *materials and instructions for bird feeder on today's resource sheet "Wind Chimes and Bird Feeders."* Check that none of the children are allergic to the supplies for the bird feed.
- ❑ **Quiet zone:** *poster "Seed Sun," objects from nature, magnifying glass, and directions* (p. 38)
- ❑ **Art zone:** *today's resource sheet "Wind Chimes and Bird Feeders," wire clothes hangers, recycled metal objects, string or fishing line, and (optional) embroidery hoops, cardboard tubes, or small tree branches*
- ❑ **Music zone:** *song "The Peace of the Earth" (p. 9 in Music Section, also #10 on Seasons Music CD)*

Bless

- ❑ Bring *song "The Peace of the Earth" (p. 9 in Music Section, also #10 on Seasons Music CD)*.



Breath of Hope

Scripture

Ezekiel 37:1–14

FOCUS To find joy in Ezekiel's report of new life with God's spirit.**GATHER**

Welcome Greet the children as they arrive. Welcome children who have been absent or who are new. Introduce yourself to new children and them to the group.

Song On this fifth Sunday of Lent, invite the children to sing "Hold Us in Your Grace" (p. 5 in *Music Section*, also #11 on *Seasons Music CD*) together. Repeat it at least twice. During the song, have a child receive the offering.

Litany Lead the group in the Lenten gathering litany (p. 116).

Extinguish the candles as a sign that the opening ritual is over.

Connecting with the focus

Art conversation Display the poster *Questioning Children*. Ask:

■ **What do you think the artist used to make this piece of art?**

Explain that the title the artist gave this work is *Questioning Children*. Ask:

■ **What do you think of this title? Do the children appear to be questioning to you? Why? Why not?**

When prompted, children often have interesting comments to make about art. Tell them that the story today is not about questioning people, but about people who appear to be wooden like the children in this art.

2 ENGAGE**Preparing for the story**

Hebrew Scriptures Invite a child to get the Bible from the worship table. Hold it so the children can see where the bookmark is. Ask:

■ **Do you think the story is from the Hebrew Scriptures or the New Testament?**

Open the Bible to the bookmark and read the name of the book to the group. Explain that Ezekiel was a prophet of God and the book of Ezekiel tells his story. Ask a child to turn to **Ezekiel 37**.

The Bible story

Ezekiel's dream Tell the story on today's resource sheet "New Life and Hope," based on **Ezekiel 37:1–14**. After the story, ask:

■ **What do you think the people said when Ezekiel told them about this dream?**

Exploring the story further

To enable the children to explore the story further, according to interests and abilities, explain the two options and have each child select one.

Sticks story group This activity will help the children review the Bible story as well as imagine how the people and Ezekiel felt. Give each child two craft sticks or dowels. Suggest that they experiment with tapping or sliding them to show emotions or feelings. Ask them to use the sticks to express sadness, anger, happiness, and surprise. This will prepare them to react as you tell the story from today's resource sheet "New Life and Hope." Pause at the asterisks in the story and instruct the children to use their sticks to show the feelings of Ezekiel or the people:

Ezekiel research group There is more to know about Ezekiel. This group will answer questions by looking in their Bibles. Along with Bibles, pencils, and the directions below, provide copies of today's resource sheet "Who Was Ezekiel?"

- 1 Take a copy of "Who Was Ezekiel?" You also need a Bible and a pencil.
- 2 Follow the directions on the page so you can complete the sentence at the bottom of the page.
- 3 Together decide what information about Ezekiel you want to tell the others.



The Bible story and us

Play the song "The Anointing" (pp. 6–7 in *Music Section*, also #5 on *Seasons Music CD*) as the signal to gather together. Hear the information about Ezekiel from the Ezekiel research group. Ask:

■ **Where is God's hope needed today?**

3

RESPOND

Invite the children to select a zone and work with the materials there.

- **Lent zone: Lenten offering/project** If the Lenten offering will be brought in on Palm Sunday, make reminders for the children to take home. The children in this group can prepare a brief presentation for Bless to remind the group of what the offering or project will accomplish.
- **Outreach zone: Restoration of creation** In Ezekiel's dream, God called upon him to restore life to the dry bones. God's people today can participate in the restoration of the earth. One project for this restoration is bird feeders. See today's resource sheet "Wind Chimes and Bird Feeders," which also has directions for making two kinds of bird feeders. Also consider a project for the children that will restore the church grounds, such as planting flowers, or another activity particular to your community.
- **Quiet zone: Quiet corner** Looking closely at nature can bring hope too. Display the poster *Seed Sun* in this zone. Set a magnifying glass and objects of nature on the small table. Provide these directions:
- **Art zone: Wind chimes** Ezekiel brought a message of hope from God for the people. The message promised that the breath of God would bring them new life. As a reminder of the breath of God, have the children make wind chimes. See the directions on today's resource sheet "Wind Chimes and Bird Feeders." Other holders for wind chimes are embroidery hoops, cardboard tubes, or small tree branches.
- **Music zone: Song for the earth** The song "The Peace of the Earth" (p. 9 in *Music Section*, also #10 on *Seasons Music CD*) is a musical way of recalling the peace and hope that comes from God. Teach the song to the children. Work on the first two lines and then add the rest of the song. If you have several children in this zone, have some of the children sing the first two lines; the rest of the children, the last two lines. When the children are familiar with the melody, substitute "hope" for "peace." Recall how the message from God gave hope to the people.

Look at the poster. The title is *Seed Sun*. It is made of goat's beard seeds. The artist Richard Solomon arranged them and then took this photograph.

He believes that we need to slow down and look closely at nature. This will help us remember the hope God gives to us.

Take the magnifying glass and look closely at one of the objects on the table. Think about the hope you see in God's world.





Gather Play “The Anointing” (pp. 6–7 in *Music Section*, also #5 on *Seasons Music CD*) as the signal to gather in a circle around the worship table.

Bring the song “The Peace of the Earth” (p. 9 in *Music Section*, also #10 on *Seasons Music CD*). Sing it again, substituting “hope” for “peace.”

Lenten offering/project If a report has been prepared, present it now.

Pray this prayer, or one of your own:

God of hope, we rejoice in your message of hope to the people and to us. Amen.

Blessing To a child next to you, say, “(Child’s name), go out with the hope of God in you.” Continue the blessing until each child and leader has been blessed.



When did the children express hope during this session? If you will not meet with the group until after Easter, consider how you might communicate with them during this time, for example by sending Easter greetings or a reminder of when

you meet again. Please notice that the session for Palm Sunday is written for all ages. If you are leading your group, look over the session early in the week so you can adapt it as necessary.



New Life and Hope

based on Ezekiel 37:1–14

When telling a story filled with mystery, play up that aspect. Children enjoy it, and it adds to the wonder of what God can do.

The people of Judah had been living far away from their homes for ten long years. They didn't like to say it, but each one wondered, "Will we ever see our homes again?" Even Ezekiel, the prophet of God, wondered if things would ever get better.*

The people and Ezekiel began to lose hope. Ezekiel was sad and discouraged. He had no good words for the people. Then Ezekiel had a dream. In the dream, God showed Ezekiel a valley. But it wasn't any valley Ezekiel had seen before. This valley was covered with dry bones.

"Ezekiel," said God in the dream, "can these bones live? Can they get up and walk around?"

Ezekiel didn't know what to say. He knew that God could do anything. "God," said Ezekiel, "you know."*

Then God said to Ezekiel, "Tell these bones to live again. Tell them that I God will put muscle and skin on them. I will put breath into them. They will live again."

So Ezekiel said, "Bones, live again. God will put muscle and skin on you. God will put breath into you. You will live again."

Suddenly, the bones began to shake and rattle with a great noise. The bones began to move together.*

Then God said to Ezekiel, "Tell the breath to come from the four winds. Tell the breath to come from the north, the south, the east, and the west. Tell the breath to breathe on these bones that they will live."

Ezekiel did what God said. The breath came into the bones and they became living bodies. They stood on their feet. Hundreds and hundreds of them stood on their feet.

"Ezekiel," God said. "Look at these bodies. The bones are like the people of Judah. The people believe their bones are dried up and they have no hope. Tell them what you have seen. Give them my message: I will open your graves and bring you out, my people. I will take you back to your homes. Then you will know that I am God."

Ezekiel told the people what God said. God's words of hope and God's Spirit filled the people with new life and hope.*

**The asterisks are for the sticks story group in Engage.*



Who Was Ezekiel?

Read each Bible passage. Then answer each question. Circle the letter with the correct answer. Rearrange the letters to add the missing word in the sentence at the bottom of the page. Notice that you have an extra letter.

1. Ezekiel saw many visions from God. The one that follows the valley of dry bones is (*Ezekiel 37:15–16*)
 - F about a chariot
 - G about shepherds
 - H about a pot of boiling water
2. Ezekiel was a (*Ezekiel 1:1, 2:5*)
 - K prophet
 - L prophet and priest
 - M priest
3. Ezekiel and the people were (*Ezekiel 37:12*)
 - C living in their homeland
 - D on their way to their homes
 - E living far away from their homes in Israel
4. Ezekiel was chosen by (*Ezekiel 2:4*)
 - G the king
 - H the people
 - I God
5. Ezekiel spoke to (*Ezekiel 2:3*)
 - E the people of Egypt
 - F the people of Israel
 - G the people of Babylon

Complete this sentence. _____

God promised to breathe _ _ _ _ into the people. (*Ezekiel 37:5*)



Wind Chimes and Bird Feeders

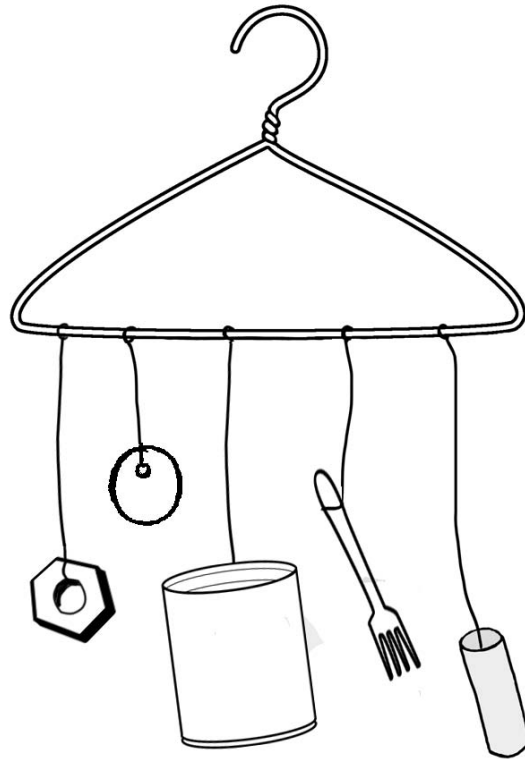
Wind chimes

Supplies

Wire clothes hanger; string; recycled metal materials such as old silverware, rings, nuts and bolts, soda pop/soft drink cans

Instructions

1. Choose the objects you would like to hang on your wind chime. Tie a piece of string onto each object. If you are using soda pop/soft drink cans, attach the string to the tab. Make the strings different lengths.
2. Decide how you would like to arrange your objects on the clothes hanger. Place the heavier items towards the middle to keep your wind chime balanced. Attach the strings to the clothes hanger.
3. Hang your wind chime outside and see how it sounds. Make any adjustments that are necessary.



Bird feeders

Make a pine cone or cardboard tube feeder as a way of caring for the birds. Be aware of any allergies to peanut butter.

Pine cone feeder

Supplies

Pine cones, honey or peanut butter, birdseed, string, spoon

Instructions

Using a spoon, cover pine cone with honey or peanut butter. Roll the cone in birdseed. Tie a string to the top end of the cone and hang outside.



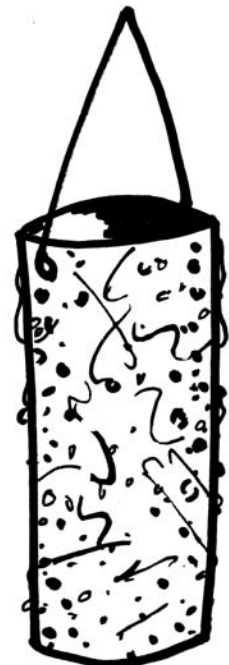
Cardboard tube feeder

Supplies

Hole punch, empty cardboard tubes, string, honey or peanut butter, plastic knife

Instructions

Poke two holes in the top of a cardboard tube using a hole punch. Push string through the holes to hang the bird feeder from a tree branch. Cover the tube with honey or peanut butter using a plastic knife. Roll in birdseed and hang on a tree branch.



Gather Rituals

Lenten gathering litany

(Place the purple cloth on the worship table.)

One: During Lent we think deeply about God and how we are living in God's ways.

All: And God is with us.

(Place the purple ribbon as a path across the cloth on the table.)

One: As we move through Lent, we ask questions of God and of ourselves.

All: And God is with us.

(Place six stones on the purple ribbon.)

One: During Lent, we hear and explore stories of journey, close relationship with God, challenge and opportunities, needs met, and strength.

All: And God is with us.

(Place six votive candles on the purple ribbon and light them.)

One: With every question and every story, we learn more about God and God's ways.

All: And God is with us.

Easter
gather
words

**In the Easter season,
we celebrate Jesus
alive in a new way.**

*(Invite the children to repeat each
line after you.)*

Together we show Jesus' love
to each other
And show Jesus' love
to the world.
We gather in love
to be the church.

