

Last Sunday those of us who are preaching this month met on Zoom for our text study to talk about the scripture readings for the month. One of the preachers for Zion and Czech Pres is the director at the Presbyterian church camp. Obviously, his ministry is primarily focused on kids.

He said he read a recent article that troubled him greatly. The article was about the high percentage of kids who had either a friendship or a romantic relationship with a chatbot.

A chatbot is a digital app that uses artificial intelligence to react as a real person. Apparently chatbots have also been created for lonely elderly people to have conversations and feel less alone. The chatbot can respond to questions as well as initiate conversations, remind people to take their medications, and generally offer encouragement and a companionship of sorts.

We have an Amazon Echo. Alexa is the name you use when you want it to do something. There are often prompts on the screen that say things like ask me about the dog breed of the day...or ask me to tell a joke.

So I took her up on the joke. I said hey Alexa tell me a joke. I don't remember the joke, but it was a groaner. I said "Alexa that's not very funny." And she said, "I'm sorry. I try my best."

And I felt bad – like I'd hurt the feelings of this machine.

Alexa sounds like a real person. You can change the voice and accent. Alexa can even respond with something approximating emotion. But she's not a real person. She doesn't have the breath of life in her. She is not alive.

Perhaps if this scene from Ezekiel played out in some dystopian future, instead of a valley of dry bones it would be a valley of obsolete chatbots.

This vision of the valley of dry bones literally represents a battlefield. For the people in exile, It calls to mind the invasion of the Babylonians into Judah and the death and destruction they brought with them. It represents the bones of the people of Judah, slaughtered in the Babylonian conquest.

But it's not just that. It is also a symbolic representation of the dead hopes and dreams of God's people, languishing in exile. They feel that as a people they have died and they are completely cut off from God. They are like dried bones lying in a valley, forgotten by time and by God.

Ezekiel is a prophet who was actually living in exile. The role of a prophet is to speak God's word.

We've now focused on several prophets. Before the exile the prophets spoke dire warnings of judgement and of the coming destruction.

Now, there were also assurances that that wouldn't be the end...that God still planned a future for them. But for the most part, the warnings were meant to urge the people to repent.

Now during the exile the prophets turn to hope. But hope can be elusive in situations of exile and despair. Hope needs a picture or an image to literally bring it to life.

And there's no better image than this image of Ezekiel speaking into a scene of desolation and death and hopelessness.

As Ezekiel speaks, the bones rattle and get to their feet. Sinew, muscles, skin, cover the bones.

And with Ezekiel's final prophecy to the winds, the breath of God enters them and they come to life.

Ezekiel is a strange book that is largely made up of visions. They are visions meant to assure the remaining exiles that God will breathe life back into them...that death does not get the last word.

Just the fact that Ezekiel was given this vision and these words by God means the prophets are still speaking.

And if the prophets are still speaking, then in spite of their desolate and despairing situation, God has not abandoned them.

Wind, or breath is this week's advent theme. In Hebrew the word is ruach. In Greek it's pneuma. In both languages, the word can mean either breath, or wind, or spirit. This triple meaning gives us a beautiful interplay of all three as we reflect on this story and other key biblical stories.

In the beginning, a wind from God blew over the waters of chaos and God's breath brought all that is into being.

In the garden, God breathed life into the man of clay making him fully alive.

In the tomb, the crucified Jesus on the third day drew in the breath of life and lived again.

In a locked room with frightened disciples, Jesus breathed on them and put the Holy Spirit into them, giving them new life.

At Pentecost, another wind from God blew in and filled the disciples, not only with life, but with the ability to speak words of life to those who desperately needed to hear it. That wind was also the Holy Spirit.

God is in the business of breathing life into creation. And not even death can stop that.

Ezekiel the prophet receives that sacred task of speaking words of hope to a devastated people.

That brings me back to the chatbots.

Imagine a lonely, shy teenager creating a friend...or romantic partner...on a Grok or Kindroid or Replika App on their phone.

Or an 80 something woman who can't get out much and who doesn't really have family around visiting with an AI companion who resides in a lamp-like device on her end table.

Some AI chatbots are even used as actual therapists, often with disastrous results.

It is said that we have an epidemic of loneliness in our country. Maybe in some cases, a chatbot is better than nothing.

And in combination with actual human interaction, they have been shown to improve quality of life for older people.

But they don't have the breath of life in them...and they certainly don't have God's breath in them.

But do you know who does? You do!

God's breath gave us life. In Christ's resurrection and ascension, the Holy Spirit was unleashed to enter our bodies to bring new life...just like that first breath of life breathed into the man in the Garden of Eden. God's breath...God's Spirit dwells inside us.

And like Ezekiel, we too can use our breath to speak words of hope to those who desperately need to hear it.

We may not be prophets, but it is part of our baptismal call to speak words of hope into a world that desperately needs it...to tell others where we find our hope.

As long as we have breath in us, we can use that breath to speak hope to a lonely senior or a teen who feels completely alone.

We can call up someone who lives alone and chat for real.

We can volunteer in hospitals and nursing homes and shelters and soup kitchens to bring hope to those who have felt abandoned by society and by God.

We can counter hateful statements with love and compassion. We can speak up for the powerless.

We can use our breath to speak words of kindness...to compliment someone.

We can be real for the people we love...vulnerable. We can use our breath to share what we are longing for.

We can ask for forgiveness...and we can grant it. We can trust that if God can forgive us, maybe we should forgive ourselves.

We can use our breath to pray. Prayer is us breathing back the love God first breathed into us.

And most of all, we can use our breath to speak about that special baby born into a world of pain...we can speak the hope and joy in the assurance that in that child, the God made flesh, God is still in the business of breathing life into the world. And that death still does not get the last word.