

Live Into Hope
Ezekiel 37:1–14
John 11:25-26

Westminster Presbyterian Church
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December 10, 2017

Ezekiel 37:1–14

The hand of the Lord came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. He led me all round them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. He said to me, ‘Mortal, can these bones live?’ I answered, ‘O Lord God, you know.’ Then he said to me, ‘Prophesy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the Lord.’

So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them. Then he said to me, ‘Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.’ I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

Then he said to me, ‘Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, “Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.” Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord God: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act, says the Lord.’

John 11:25-26

Jesus said to her, ‘I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?’

Two weeks ago, we heard from the prophet Jeremiah, preaching to the people in exile in Babylon. He told them to seek the welfare of the city where they were, to do what was best for that city. Then last week, we heard about the three young men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, exiles in Babylon who sought the welfare of the city, but who remained people of God. They refused to worship Nebuchadnezzar’s golden statue or let the king tell them where their core identity as human beings should come from.

This week, we are still in the same time period. Ezekiel is another of God's prophets. Unlike Jeremiah, he has been forced to walk from Jerusalem to Babylon, because the Babylonians see him as trouble. Ezekiel is trouble. He preaches something to the exiles in Babylon that is more dangerous than anything else he could think of. He preaches hope.

The people in Babylon, the people to whom Ezekiel is preaching, are completely despondent. A psalmist explains,

“Alongside Babylon’s streams, there we sat down, crying because we remembered Zion. We hung our lyres up in the trees there because that’s where our captors asked us to sing. Our tormentors requested songs of joy: ‘Sing us a song about Zion!’ they said. But how could we possibly sing the Lord’s song on foreign soil?”¹

The Hebrew people feel like they have been destroyed. Not just destroyed, but like they have been demolished a long time ago. Like there is nothing left but a pile of bones to mark that there ever was such a people as the people of God.

Ezekiel tells them the story of this vision that he had. This vision is probably the one thing that most people remember about Ezekiel, if only because of the song, you remember,

“Toe bone connected to the foot bone
Foot bone connected to the heel bone
Heel bone connected to the ankle bone.
...Now hear the word of the Lord...”²

God shows Ezekiel a valley full of dry bones, and asks him whether these bones can live again. Ezekiel, perhaps sensing a trick question, tells God, “I’m sure that you know.” On command, Ezekiel then starts preaching the word of God to these bones, and they come together

¹ Psalm 137:1-4 (Common English Bible).

² James Wheldon Johnson, “Dem Bones,” first recorded 1928. Lyrics from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dem_Bones.

into individual skeletons. He continues preaching the word of God to these bones, and the bones start growing muscles and tendons and skin.

But they are still dead. Preaching the word of God to these bones has turned them from a pile of bones to a mess of dead bodies. It is an improvement, but not enough of an improvement.

God tells Ezekiel to preach to “the Breath.” This Hebrew word that is translated breath, the word is *ruach*. It means breath, and wind, but it also means spirit. When God made Adam, God formed the body out of dirt, but there was no life until God breathed God’s spirit, the *Ruach Elohim*, into the body. Then Adam “became a living being.”³

The wind blows through the valley, and the same thing happens to these bodies that happened to Adam: they come to life. God explains to Ezekiel that these bones represent the people of God. They are complaining that, “Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.” To that God responds that God will open their graves and bring them back up from their graves. God will breathe God’s *ruach* into them, and they will live. God will bring them back to their own land, and they will know beyond question that God has acted in the world.

This is a great story. Like the three men in the fiery furnace last week, though, we teach this story to our kids in Sunday School, but we don’t talk about it much as adults.⁴ Maybe we ought to talk about it more often.

I hear some people today saying that the mainline church is dying, if not actually dead.

³ Genesis 2:7.

⁴ In the Revised Common Lectionary, the most commonly used schedule of texts for preaching, this text is the fifth Sunday of Lent in year A, which is to say, once every three years. It is paired with the raising of Lazarus, which is, no doubt, the focus of most sermons that Sunday. It is also part of the Easter Vigil, a service rarely celebrated in Protestant congregations.

I hear some people today, even people in the Big-C Church, saying that small congregations are all going to close eventually, and that we are just putting off the inevitable.

If we depended solely on our own powers, this would be true.

If we view a congregation purely as a small business, then cash and customer numbers are king. A small congregation with fifty-some members and about half a dozen part-time employees doesn't look like much.

If we view a denomination as a network of small business franchises, then cash is the most important thing, and the denomination should not waste time and money on small franchises when big ones exist. The efficient thing is to merge little franchises into the ones that have proven themselves by growing.

It's a good thing that that is not how God sees things.

I'll say that again. It's a good thing that that is not how God sees things.

God sees the bones of a small congregation like this one. Like a contractor on one of those fixer-up shows on TV, God looks, and says, "It's got good bones." Good bones are necessary, to take the weight of flesh and sinews, or the weight of walls and roof. On one of those shows, good bones are the difference between a house that they bulldoze and start over, and one that gets new life when they renovate it.

Good bones for a congregation are simple, but hard to fix, if they are not already there. Good bones are a spirit of love. Good bones are people wanting to talk with each other during the passing of the peace. Good bones are people talking with visitors and caring how they are doing. You all genuinely care about each other and about the people outside these windows, and

that's not something that can really be faked. When you have good bones, you can have a sense of humor, because you know the foundation is solid.

Good bones are required, but they are not enough to have life. If you try, you have just a skeleton shambling around, something out of a horror show.

You need the word of God being preached and heard. It is not enough for the word to be preached. Ezekiel could have preached the word of God all day; if it wasn't heard, he would have been wasting his time. The word of God preached and heard is what puts muscles on those bones. Muscles, and the ligaments that hold the bones together and the tendons that connect the muscles to the bones. Skin covering it all, so that nothing falls out.

But bones and muscles and tendons and ligaments and skin are not enough to have people walking around. If you try that, you end up with a zombie, a dead body walking around.

There are zombie churches out there, churches that look like they are alive until you look closely. Then you discover that they are really only concerned about the people who are already inside the church, and in the "In Group" inside the church. They are more concerned with protecting their investments and their political power than they are with taking care of people who don't look like what they call the "core members" of "THEIR church." If they help someone, there is a quid pro quo involved, where they expect that person to do something for the church in return. They are more concerned with institutional survival than they are with being God's outpost in the world.

There are small zombies out there. There are some awfully big zombies out there. But they're still zombies.

Something more than mere institutional survival is required for genuine life. Ezekiel preaches to the breath, the spirit, the *ruach Elohim*. The wind comes and breathes life into the bodies, and, like Adam, they become living beings.

The Holy Spirit blows where it wills. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going.⁵ We don't get to control the Holy Spirit, which is why it can be scary.

But we are not alive without it.

The Holy Spirit calls us as individuals to love our neighbors and to serve them. The Holy Spirit calls us as a congregation to proclaim the Gospel, to nurture the Children of God, to maintain divine worship, to preserve the truth, promote social righteousness, and to show the world around us what the Kingdom of Heaven looks like.⁶ We do all these things by loving each other, and by loving them.

When we feed people on the Hilltop, and tell them that God loves them,⁷ without any expectation that they will ever show up in a regular worship service or do anything for us, we proclaim the Gospel, we nurture God's children, and we show them what the Kingdom of Heaven looks like.

When we advocate for the benefit of the poor and those overlooked or ignored by the powerful, we promote social righteousness and we preserve the truth that God so loved the whole world,... well, you know the rest.⁸

⁵ John 3:8

⁶ The Six Great Ends of the Church, paraphrased from *The Book of Order*, F.1.0304.

⁷ This congregation is one of several congregations who participate in HM3, Hoge Memorial Presbyterian Church's weekly meal, music, message on Saturday nights.

⁸ John 3:16.

When we welcome strangers, and we are genuinely concerned about what we can do for them, without a thought for what they can do for us, we show them what the Kingdom of Heaven looks like.

Ezekiel's vision applies to us as a congregation, and to us as part of the big-C universal Church of Jesus Christ. We need to maintain our good bones. We need to hear the Word of God. And we need to be open to the Holy Spirit, the *Ruach Elohim*. The good news here is that, if we do that, what we celebrate at Christmas is that God came to Earth so that we might have life, and have it abundantly.⁹

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.

⁹ John 10:10.