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Dem Bones Will Rise Again

Ezekiel 37:1-14

37 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.² He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry.³ God said to me, “Mortal, can these bones live?” I answered, “O Lord God, you know.”⁴ Then he said to me, “Prophesy to these bones and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord.⁵ Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath^[a] to enter you, and you shall live.⁶ I will lay sinews on you and will cause flesh to come upon you and cover you with skin and put breath^[b] in you, and you shall live, and you shall know that I am the Lord.”

⁷ 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.⁸ 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.⁹ Then he said to me, “Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath:^[c] Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath,^[d] and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.”¹⁰ I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

¹¹ 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.’¹² 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.¹³ And you shall know that I am the Lord when I open your graves and bring you up from your graves, O my people.¹⁴ 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.”

Several weeks ago, I attended a clergy gathering at a small Mennonite church in rural Hubbard, Oregon – which is a beautiful part of the world if you haven't been there. This community is made up of a handful of family farms, two cafes, and a defunct railroad. Zion Mennonite has been a part of that community since 1893 – which is about as old as you get for churches in the state of Oregon.

The program was lovely, and afterward I went in search of a restroom, but I got lost and found myself in the church nursery by accident. The room is situated toward the back of the church and it has wood-paneled walls and large windows on three sides and like most nurseries has cozy rocking chairs and tiny tables and toys. I paused to take in the view. The windows look out on an impressive grove of White Oak trees, which provide a canopy to the church graveyard that has obviously been there since the beginning – all the headstones along the fence tilt haphazardly with age. I imagined what Sunday mornings are like in that space. All that light and noise - little babies and toddlers learning the words and songs of faith– immediately adjacent, if you will, to the valley of the shadow of death.

Some might call this placement of the nursery a little morose. But I think its hopeful. Building graveyards right outside sanctuaries (Sunday school rooms) is an old tradition. We've been doing it since the 4th century. If you google it, the internet will tell you that Christians do this because we want to bury our dead in consecrated soil, which is partially true I suppose, but it's a small part of the story. A better explanation has to do with one of the hallmarks of our faith. Christians, like all human beings, know full-well that we are mortal. We are dust and to dust we will return. But in Jesus, we believe that death is not the end – it not the final word in the story God is writing in this world. Gravestones are an important symbol of God's unfinished work. We worship within a stone's throw of the grave as an embodied creed. And we rock our babies to sleep in the face of death because this allows us to both **ask AND answer *hopefully*** the question posed to the prophet Ezekiel long ago, **“Can these bones live?”**

Ezekiel was a prophet and a priest during a cataclysmic time in Israel's history and this historical context sets the stage for the book. King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon conquered Jerusalem and the religious and political elite were forced into exile. They were drug hundreds of miles across the Syrian desert, into the Mesopotamian valley, and there they confronted the brutal reality that life as they knew it was over – their temple, their monarchy, their religious freedom was no more. Several prophets were called in that 70-year period and Ezekiel was one of them.

- The first half of his book offers explanations as to how the people of God found themselves in exile (there's a lot of finger wagging).

- The second half of the book makes a turn: through Ezekiel, God offers words of assurance and words of promise: restoration and liberation is on its way. The “dry bones” passage in chapter 37 is a continuation of this promise.

Let’s return to the story.

Ezekiel is taken by the Spirit into the middle of a valley where he is surrounded by dry, brittle bones. He’s led through the valley so he can get a good look – at the vastness of the desolation. Ezekiel is then asked the question: can these bones live?

Now, the question is absurd. The laws of physics do not allow such things. But because Ezekiel is standing with the Creator of the universe, he wisely plays it safe and defers, “*O Lord, you know.*”

God then says to Ezekiel, “*Prophecy to the bones, Ezekiel... Speak to them. And tell them that I will cause breath to enter you. I will cause flesh to come upon you and cover you with skin.*” So, Ezekiel prophesies to the dry, brittle bones. The valley begins to thrum with sound - a rattling as the bones come together, bone-to-bone. They rise into these lifeless figures before him.... and God says, “*Prophecy to the breath, Ezekiel. Speak to the breath and tell the breath to come from the four winds, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.*” So, Ezekiel speaks to the breath, which in Hebrew is Ruach, God’s breath, God’s Spirit. And the Spirit, the Ruach, breathes life into the multitude.... and they live.

God explains the vision to Ezekiel, so he can interpret it faithfully, “*These bones represent the whole house of Israel. These are the ones whose hope is lost, those whose bones are dried up, who feel cut off completely. Tell them, Ezekiel, tell them I will bring them back from the grave, back to their land...*

I the Lord have spoken and I will act.”

They are powerful words of prophecy. And while delivered 2500 years ago, there is something within us that asks, “*And what about us? Will you raise to life our dry bones too?*”

In their original context, these words of promise are about the restoration of a nation. But we Christians have always understood this as a resurrection story. Ezekiel’s vision affirms God’s sovereignty over life and death, and it provides us something else as well. It provides us a metaphor about what God can do with the bleak and desolate places in our world. It affirms a promise that is woven throughout the whole of scripture: God makes a way where there seems to be no way.

The “dry bones passage” from Ezekiel was made somewhat famous in the last century here in the United States by a song written by James Weldon Johnson, a composer and a Civil Rights activist. I remember hearing it as a child:

Dem bones, dem bones, gonna walk around...

Now hear the word of the Lord.

Do you remember this song?

It's catchy and like all spirituals from that era, encapsulates a hope in God's liberating work. The song, like the Biblical text, affirms that God's power is big enough and strong enough to do miracles...

...But believing such a claim is difficult.

I was talking recently with a woman who is going through a divorce and at one point in the conversation she laughed and said, "Carmen, I'm 52 years old and I feel like my life is over. I just don't know how I am supposed to begin again." I reminded her that the American author Sue Monk Kidd published her first book at age 53, so who knows what might happen. Then I told her, probably more importantly as a pastor, that if God can breathe life into dry bones and they can live again, and if God can raise Jesus from the dead, surely God can breathe new life into you as well.

I'm reading a children's book with my daughters right now that I never read as a child myself. It's called *The Secret Garden* and it's beloved by many. It's the story of a dreadful little girl named Mary who spent her early years spoiled and isolated devoid of real friendship and love. And after being sent to live with her reclusive Uncle in the heart of the English moors, she experiences utter transformation as she learns to cultivate love and friendship all while tending a neglected garden. It remains a classic children's book because deep down I think we all want to read stories that remind us that rebirth like this is possible.

I recently watched a documentary about a man from Ecuador named Omar Tello. In his childhood, Omar watched loggers cut down huge portions of the Amazon rainforest and one day he decided he would regrow some of it on his own land. His neighbors thought he was completely mad, but over 40 years, he created a tiny oasis in a sea of development by finding rare seeds and cuttings from deep in the Amazon basin and replanting them – even quitting his job to tend this forest full time. His idea has inspired other farmers to regrow forests on their land nearby. And there is something extravagantly hopeful and brave and faithful about his life's work.

I share all of these stories with you because I think we Presbyterians, and I love us very much, need reminding that God's redemptive, renewing, restoring work is ongoing. God is still resurrecting dry bones today. Just like Ezekiel, God invites us to

take part. Only Jesus can do something about our mortality – and indeed he has – but when it comes to bringing hope and light and life into this world today – God says, “*Prophecy to the bones, Presbyterians. Speak to them. Act in the dry and desolate places and pray to the One who can raise the dead.*” Because just as God through Ezekiel transformed the valley of dry bones, God can transform our valleys as well.

As you take in this story this morning, I wonder which part resonates with you the most? Perhaps you feel a kinship to Ezekiel – that God has led you to a desolate place and you are facing the impossible. Maybe you feel more like the dry bones themselves- and you could use God’s renewing, resurrecting, life-giving breath in your own life.

Wherever you find yourself in this story, hear this word of hope: God led Ezekiel into the valley of dry bones, for love’s sake. God sent Christ to dwell among us – to heal and redeem the world - for love’s sake. And when God looks at you and me – at our old dry bones– God says, “Yes, you— even you ... for love’s sake.”

This morning, we have been given the gift of another day, another opportunity to be reborn. So, let’s resolve to be like grandmas in a church nursery, who keep the faith, who sing the songs of God’s promises– in full view of the valley of the shadow of death. Let us live today hopefully, defiantly, and fully, trusting in the resurrecting power of Christ who is still rescuing and redeeming the world... for Love’s Sake.

Let us pray: *Almighty God, we are mortal. Despite our best efforts, our lives on this earth will not go on forever. And what’s to be done about our death is to be done by Christ alone. But in the meanwhile, we trust that you have work for us to do. Help us to be faithful. And help us to believe that in Christ, new beginnings are possible for us even now. Amen.*