

“Back to Life”

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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. ² He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. ³ He said to me, “Mortal, can these bones live?” I answered, “O Lord GOD, you know.” ⁴ Then he said to me, “Prophecy 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 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 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, “Prophecy 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.” 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.”

The Toe bone’s connected to the Foot bone ... Heel bone ... Ankle bone ... “Dem Bones,” by James Weldon Johnson was recorded by The Famous Myers Jubilee Singers in 1928.

When God asks, “Can these bones live again?” we might wonder at Ezekiel’s response. We can’t hear his tone of voice but we can wonder. To fully grasp the hope in the latter part of our text we need to think about its context. Before we can hear bones coming back together or marvel at reformed humans alive again, we need to ask questions, like what brought Ezekiel to the place of such uncertainty?

This vision dates to the period known as the Babylonian Exile. In 597 BCE, the Babylonian armies defeated Jerusalem and deported the king and many leaders to Babylon. Ten years later when Jerusalem had rebelled again, the Babylonians razed Jerusalem and its temple and deported a second wave of leaders. Ezekiel was among the first wave of exiles.

For those forced to live in Babylon, the future seemed bleak. The exile was more than just a loss of identity. It was also a crisis of faith. The symbols of their faith – Jerusalem, the temple, the Davidic monarchy – had been destroyed. According to the understanding of the time, many assumed their god had been defeated by a stronger one from Babylon. They wondered, Was God truly God? Because we seldom read all that leads up to this scene, we have a narrow view of the

people's despair. We forget the two-year siege, the famine and disease. We miss the trauma.

Our text describes a prophetic vision – a visual metaphor. Getting swooped away to a valley full of bones – even if only in spirit – is eerie enough, but things get more creepier as God leads Ezekiel around and around it all. Not only are there thousands of bones to wade through (each human body has more than 200 bones), they've been dead a long time. Think of the elephant graveyard in *Lion King*. Or Aragorn, Gimly and Aragorn under the mountain. The bones have been exposed for God knows how long. They're brittle, noisy. After the grisly tour, God asks Ezekiel: "Can these bones live?"

"You may know the answer, God but I sure don't!" Looking around, there are dry bones everywhere! Live? It doesn't seem possible. Still Ezekiel defers to the God who knows... and wants to be known.

Next, God commands Ezekiel to prophesy over the bones, ordering them to listen to God's word. Last week, I mentioned that the Hebrew word for Spirit is feminine. Besides meaning spirit, *Ruach* also means wind and breath. In this vision, the word comes again and again as the prophet plays on all three meanings to make clear God's promise to the exiles.

For the story to unfold, these bones need not only flesh, sinew, and skin. . . but also breath: "I will. . . put *breath* in you, and you shall live." Then, in the vision, sinew, flesh, and skin cover the bones, but there is no *breath* in them. So, Ezekiel prophesies to the *breath*, "Come from the *four winds*, O *Breath*, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live." And "the *breath* came into them, and they lived." Ezekiel summarizes God's intention: "I will put my *spirit* with you, and you shall live."

A valley full of bones is chilling enough. To envision the equally unnerving depiction of these disarticulated bones coming together, bone by bone, then sinew by sinew, then covered by flesh, then skin, but still *dead* seems even worse. As if the valley is full of zombies.

By now, you're wondering, "Why did she pick this text?!"

If there is to be new life, for the people of Judah, for the people of Palestine and Israel today, even for us here at First Church, it will come only through God's word, only through the Spirit's action, God's breath. We can hope that such rebirth will not involve such gruesome images as Ezekiel witnesses, and yet by its very definition, rebirth suggests that there is a period in-between in which one is not living.

I travel to Palestine in October. I look forward to meeting Father Chacour. There are many Christians in Palestine though we seldom think about this. The peoples in the once Fertile Crescent don't coexist well and haven't for centuries. At least sixty are dead this week in protests over embassy moves.

Closer to home, the UMC mirrors our nation in that we shelter such a diversity of viewpoints over who and what matters. Shall we build walls or offer welcome? Call others neighbors or aliens? Promote guns or safety? Are we all children of God or only certain ones? This month, our Council of Bishops rejected two constitutional amendments meant to protect equality and justice for women and girls. Does this reflect homophobia, misogyny or both? What slow death is occurring in our nation or in our denomination?

Then even closer, we look at our beloved church right here on the corner of McIndoe and Third. You know even better than I do that First Church is not what it once was. The Sunday school

rooms may never have all been full, but there used to be people of all ages here on a Sunday morning, and other days as well. Those of you who have lived through those times are not to be faulted for wondering, “Is this all there is for us?”

Which brings us full circle back to our text. The exiles as well as those left in Jerusalem were at a loss to envision what good might possibly be ahead for them. God visits Ezekiel with this vision.

Something I didn’t notice until last month is that God tells Ezekiel to call the breath that brings life. It is God’s breath yet God has Ezekiel use it. Divine initiative and human action are interwoven. God leads Ezekiel to the valley. The prophet describes what he sees. God leads the prophet’s speech. Ezekiel does as he is directed. As he does so, God brings the bones together. God’s initiative, human participation.

Then God explains:

“Human one, these bones are the **church in Wausau**. Some of them say, ‘Our bones are dried up, and our hope has perished. We are completely finished.’ So now, prophesy and say to them, The Lord God proclaims: I’m opening your graves! I will raise you up from your graves, and I will bring you fruitfulness. You will know that I am God, when I open your graves and raise you up from your dying places, my people. I will put my breath in you, and you will live. I have planted you on fertile land. Know that I am God. I’ve spoken, and I will do it.”

The text doesn’t exactly say that, but you get the idea. I once pastored a church that was dead. They were just being slow to accept it. First Church is so far from being dead – I need you to hear this so I’m saying it again, First UMC has so much life and vitality – that only if we decide to take care of ourselves to the exclusion of those beyond our walls will we be facing death.

This is a large part of why we were one of six UMCs in the state selected for a special revitalization and growth initiative. It’s called MISSIONAL CHURCH CONSULTATION INITIATIVE (MCCI). This is such a great opportunity for us. When Forrest Wells, our D.S., first sent me the specs for what kinds of churches and pastors they were looking for, I was in awe at how perfectly the requirements met who we are as a church.

If you want to see someone really excited about this fantastic opportunity, bring MCCI up with Mike Zahn over coffee after the service. Or Dick or Wes or Jane or Margaret.

Today is Pentecost Sunday, when we celebrate the action of God as Spirit in forming what would become the Christian Church. But that action is not over. The Spirit is still active, still moving and shaking things up.

Anywhere people are willing to accept her leadings, the Spirit leads us into further ministry in our communities and into greater depth in our relationship with Christ.

We are the ones who have to be open and we are the ones who have to do the work. I know some of you don’t like to hear about it, but being a Christian is not a static one-time confession, it’s a living out of God’s call on lives. We accept the call and our lives are no longer our own.

We need to keep reminding ourselves of this. Christ has no hands or voice but ours. God calls us to answer, like Ezekiel to take the authority we are given. God calls us to make whatever changes have to be made, and to live into the kingdom God intends for this world to be.