

Ezekiel 37:1-14**“Oh Dry Bones, Hear the Word of the Lord”****August 29, 2021**

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“In the thirtieth year, in the fourth month, on the fifth day of the month, as I was among the exiles by the Chebar canal, the heavens were opened, and I saw vision of God.” (Ezek. 1:1)

With these words, readers enter the world and experiences of Ezekiel, a Judean priest and one of God’s prophets. Like many others in the history of God’s people, Ezekiel emerged as God’s chosen prophet during a time of crisis—for he was a man among those living in exile after Israel’s great enemy, the Babylonians, had conquered and laid siege to Jerusalem. 10,000 Israelites were forced out of their homes and exiled to Babylon.

When the Babylonians marched into the holy city of Jerusalem, they plundered the streets and homes, maimed their leaders put them in chains. The Israelite soldiers were put to the sword, and their young men and women were either killed or dragged off to this foreign land. Having lost everything God’s people were forced to live in a faraway country complete with idols and enemies on all sides. With dreams and livelihoods in shreds and the King of Babylon having worked their fingers to the bone, God’s people are done. They had lost all hope, their spirits were frozen in despair, and such as it was, their faith in God had become extinct. In sum, they were bone tired and angry that God would allow this to happen to them.

Today’s story in chapter 37 of the Book of Ezekiel takes place during one of the most difficult stretches of that time in exile. They had lost everything: hope and heart, confidence in God, and, most shockingly, the death of the spiritual cornerstone of their faith: the Temple, which had been destroyed. Among those deported and living in the midst of this desolation and hopelessness was a young man named Ezekiel. God called Ezekiel to step forward and boldly prophesy to His people in despair. The entire book is full of Ezekiel declaring oracle after oracle of admonishment and of hope during the people’s deepest, darkest season.

The opening image of our story today brilliantly captures the moment. The bleak scene is laid bare before the prophet. God’s own hand places Ezekiel smack dab in the middle of a valley and walks him all around it. And what does the prophet see? Bones upon bones.

Heaps of them. It’s a tragedy made all the worse by the fact that these bones are lying all over an unnamed Babylonian valley, uncared for and haphazardly dispersed. No life. No hope. Nothing but death and darkness and existence dried up. And as Ezekiel wanders through this valley of dry bones, God finally speaks to him: “Son of man, can these bones live?”

I can’t help but wonder how Ezekiel heard this question, or interpreted it. What did he think God was asking? Was this a rhetorical question? What was God’s tone? If I were Ezekiel, I would have quipped back at God : “Now what a ridiculous question to ask. Of course dead bones can’t live!”

But instead, Ezekiel stammers, “O Lord God, you know.” Again, I don’t even know what Ezekiel means by his answer. What is his tone? I’ve been walking around practicing Ezekiel’s words in my head all week, trying to determine where the inflection should be. “O Lord God, you know.” Is he dumbfounded here or is he nodding humbly before the Holy Lord in submission, waiting for God to explain what all of this means?

Anyway, there’s no answer to this question, so we press on deeper into the story where God immediately tells Ezekiel to prophesy to the bones, to say to them: “O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord.” And faithful Ezekiel obeys. He says, “So, I prophesied as I was commanded. O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. The Lord tells me he will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live...”.

Once again, I want to know more about the way Ezekiel made this pronouncement. Do you think he was he embarrassed, confused, doubtful...whispering these prophetic words, uncertain of what he was actually doing: “O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord? The Lord tells me he will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live...” ? Or was he so experienced after so many visions and truths spoken to the people that he spoke out in a loud preacher voice? “O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. The Lord tells me he will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live...”! Was this commandment so preposterous that he ended the sentence with a question mark: “O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. The Lord tells me he will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live...”? We don’t and cannot know. We must press on again to get more details from the story.

And boy what a story it is. As soon as Ezekiel starts prophesying he hears a noise, like a rattle. And the bones on the battlefield thunder as they come together, bone to bone. Ezekiel blinks and then sees that they are connecting with live tissue and muscles! He watches as they are covered with skin and flesh! Can you imagine? Ezekiel tells dry bones to hear the word of the Lord and what was chaos has become order, what was dead has become...put back together.

But. The next word Ezekiel utters to God, is “but”—a conjunction, a word used to introduce something in contrast to what has already been mentioned. Ezekiel, probably still in shock, says, “But, there was no breath in them.” And before Ezekiel can even ask God about it, God tells him to say: “Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they may live.” And again, Ezekiel obeys. And guess what? “Breath came into the dead bodies, and the people lived, and stood on their feet, an exceedingly great army.”

But this is no military army or regiment awaiting battle with weapons and swords. God is very clear with Ezekiel saying, “Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. Behold, they say, ‘Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are indeed cut off.’” God’s people, all the people of Israel. The ones who’d been dragged out of their homes. The ones who’d worked their fingers to the bone for the King of Babylon. The ones who were hopeless, crying out in despair, feeling cut off from God because their Temple was destroyed. These are the ones who’d dried up; these are the ones whose spiritual bones were scattered across that very, very dry valley.

Their real-life hearts hadn't stopped beating; it was their inner hearts—their spiritual cores that were scorched, their faith dehydrated, their joy in God wasting away in a faraway wasteland. Bone tired, in exile, God's people might as well be heaps of dead bones in a vast dry wasteland. They cry out to God: our hope is lost! We might as well be dead.

It was a bleak time for sure. And I'm willing to bet some of us may be right there with the people of Israel. Do you feel like all—or some—of your hope is lost? Do you feel like God is far away, not hearing your prayers, not listening to you crying out to him in your pain? Perhaps you feel like your faith has dried up; you are searching for an oasis for water and you'd take just about any bit of spiritual food to nourish your weary soul.

I think we can at least empathize with them. Bone tired. Thirsty for new life. Hoping for...well, just hoping for hope. Is God speaking through Ezekiel to us? Is Ezekiel prophesying even to those of us who are asking: Is there hope for new life and breath? From where will we find hope again after disaster and despair and desiccation?

The beginning of God's answer goes right back to the very beginning of scripture. God created a man, Adam. And in Genesis chapter 2 we read that God "breathed into Adam's nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living creature." And so, God, strong and mighty, through Ezekiel, now calls forth "Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live."

Life is nothing without breath. And breath comes from God alone. The word used for breath in both the Old and New Testaments is the same: In Genesis 2 and in Ezekiel 37: *ruach*, a Hebrew which means breath, life, spirit. Throughout the New Testament, *ruach* is translated in Greek as *pneuma*: which also means breath, life, spirit. To live is to breathe. To breathe is to live. No bodily life is separate from God's spirit. And so, God answers Ezekiel's question, worry, confusion "But there was no breath in them" by telling him to prophesy once more: "I am your God, and I will put breath in you and you shall live." God says to the people through Ezekiel: "I will raise you up from your graves, O my people. And I will bring you into the Land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the Lord when I open up your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people, and I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live."

And that is exactly what happened. Up from the scorched earth a multitude rises, bone to bone, sinew to muscle to skin, and breath...oh that most important component, the Spirit of the living God filling God's people with the promise of his Spirit. Their hope is restored; their lives have been refreshed! Could there be a better message in 2021 to a community weary from so many things?

But isn't this the message of Christianity from the start? More to the point, isn't this always God's promise to us? To breathe new life so we can cast away the old. To nourish and strengthen us when we are weak and weary and bone tired? To grant us joy in the midst of pain and light in the midst of darkness?

I am reminded of one of the first and one of mine and Bill's favorite flash mob videos. I remember the day Bill came upon it and loved it so much he emailed the link to me then came running back to my office to watch it with me. This particular flash mob takes place in Spain on a rather normal concrete walkway with a large plaza in front of the Banc de Sabadell on May 19, 2012. The video begins with one man in a tuxedo playing Beethoven's symphony No. 9, or as we know it, "Ode to Joy." In fact, this music is certainly special to me, for I walked down the aisle to this music in my wedding 24 years ago.

Anyway, a little girl puts a few coins in the man's black top hat and stands right in front of him, curious. Within 10 seconds a woman comes out and sits in a chair with a cello and joins him mid-song. The melody becomes clear and you know immediately what song it is. A crowd begins to gather even as groups of 8 to 10 musicians come pouring forth from inside the bank to join this orchestra on the streets in Spain. Young children climb onto their father's shoulders. One little girl climbed a light pole, holding on with one hand and mimicking the conductor with her other.

Dozens after dozens of orchestral musicians join in playing one of the most brilliant pieces of music of all time. As the crowd thickens, the camera pans and you see people singing the words to the song, faces beaming with surprise, bewildered passers-by now grinning from ear to ear and you cannot help but get caught up in the delight, the thrill, the elation that this musical presentation offers to people just going about their day to day life. Weary wrinkled faces turn into joyful ones. Humdrum lives become full of Joy. An ode to joy. God's gift of music breathing new life into his people. It's electrifying to watch. I can only imagine what it was like to be present that day.

I can't imagine what it was like that day in that valley of dry bones, when God breathed new life to a people as good as gone in the valley of dry bones. Hope and breath and promise to those numb and lifeless souls. Renewed vision and drive to his displaced, exiled people running on fumes. And this is the promise of God to ALL of his bone dried people. You, me. I imagine some of you, desperately need this windborne restoration for many other reasons. The exact details of our situations might differ from person to person and moment to moment, but the harsh actuality is usually the same. The reality in front of us is so far from hope and filled with such sorrow, and yet, the smallest whisper of faith tells us to hold onto hope.

We are not left alone to wither away in a dry, dry valley. The Holy Spirit is as our every breath: with us to help us and guide us, to nudge us and prod us, and to breathe new life into us – just when we need it the most. Whatever it is you need from the Lord, He is able. There is no space or circumstance or time that His love and promise cannot reach and restore. Like Ezekiel, maybe all we need to do is to be led. Like those in valley, maybe we just need to be still enough to draw in His breath and presence.

Can these bones live? Most definitely Yes! O Dry bones, hear the Word of the Lord. We shall all be lifted from our valleys of despair and given new life. We may have to go through a valley to reach a mountaintop, but yes, Lord, most definitely yes -- these bones live again. Thanks be to God. Amen.