

"Dem dry bones"  
Ezekiel 37:1-14  
Brentwood First Presbyterian  
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Introduction

A horrible tragedy has occurred. A battle which the children of Israel lost. In losing this battle, they have lost Jerusalem, and even now are being deported to Babylon, in current day Iraq. Iraq was just as scary to the children of Israel 2500 years ago as it is to us now.

Ezekiel looks upon the deportees, his kinsmen and women. Kinsmen and women who lament that they, the survivors of this battle, are as good as dead themselves. Because they are without hope. What is hope? Hope is the confidence that today will be better than yesterday. Or that tomorrow will be better than today. Hope is what gets us out of bed in the morning. Without hope, we are zombies. Moving through our lives without focus and without excitement. Lives without meaning. The hope of Ezekiel's kinsmen and women has perished, and without hope, they may as well be dead. What is going to happen to the men in a culture that despises them? What is going to happen to the women? Even worse, what is going to happen to their children? For Ezekiel's people at this particular time, good news is impossible to envision. Impossible for all except God, and Ezekiel catches for them, and for us, a glimpse of God's vision.

Scene 1

I am not a fan of spectator sports, but I did see the Vandy Kentucky basketball game about 10 years ago. I could tell who was going to win before the first goal. The Kentucky players heels did not touch the floor the entire game, and their hands were as high in the air as they could reach the entire game. And their smiles were as big as could be. However, the Vandy players hands were down to their knees, they were slump shouldered, and their heels did not leave the floor the entire time. I could tell who was going to win before the first goal.

Another incident. They still tell the story at William and Mary College of daffy, magnificent President Ewell. For a century and a half, this prestigious Virginia school had been a leader among American universities. Then came the Civil War. In the hard days of Reconstruction which followed, William and Mary went bankrupt. Soon it had a deserted campus, decaying buildings, and no students. As with so many Southern schools, after that tragic war, it was written off as dead by everyone.

Everyone, except its president. He had given his best years to advancing the liberal arts through that school. He refused to give up now. So, every morning,

President Ewell went to the deserted campus, climbed the tower of its main building, and rang the bells, calling the school to class. He acted as if the school was still there. People thought he was crazy. But for seven years, every day, President Ewell rang the bells at William and Mary, in defiance of the despair and hopelessness that would destroy everything he held valuable. And eventually, miraculously, it worked. Others caught his vision. Students, teachers, and money returned. Today, America's second oldest university thrives again, because of the hope of a daffy, magnificent dreamer.

Ezekiel is like that daffy old President of William and Mary. Ezekiel looks through his eyes at the sad kinsmen and women walking eyes closed, heads down, slump-shoulder, flat-foot, hands below knees, eastward on the long walk toward Babylon. And through Ezekiel's eyes he sees in the children of Israel chaotic piles of desiccated, dismembered bones. Not only have the surfaces of the bones been picked clean by decay, but the internal marrow, which makes bones alive, has dried up, so the bones are now nothing more than hollow shells. The image is of a battlefield whose slain never received proper burial, but were left to decay where they fell. The smell of dust and decay is acrid in his nostrils.

God asks Ezekiel, "Can these bones live?" Remind us of Jesus' question, "Can the blind see, can the lame walk, can the poor rejoice?" A young man in a wheelchair, crippled by an accident, asks his friend, "Do I have a future?" A couple sits in a counselor's office, "Can our marriage be saved?" A widow sinks into a chair. Only a few hours before they lowered into the ground the casket that contained her precious husband. "Can I go on?" she wonders as she softly cries. Ezekiel responds, "Lord God, only you know!"

And God does indeed know the future of the bones. Yes, God knows. Yes, the bones can live. Yes, newness is possible. Then God commands Ezekiel to tell these bones to listen to the word of God. This requires in Ezekiel a leap of faith. But as the bones start rattling with vitality, snapping together to form complete skeletons, Ezekiel realizes he is no longer looking at the children of Israel through his eyes, but through God's eyes. He is no longer looking at the children of Israel through the eyes of a linear thinker. He is no longer looking at them through physical eyes, but through the eyes of faith. Through the eyes of trust in God's promises. The bones snap together, are clothed with flesh, and skin, and are animated by the breath of God.

## Scene 2

Amos Wilder wrote a poem entitled "A Hard Death." One particular line grabs our attention today. "At the null point, the zero breeds new algebras."

Ezekiel's fellow exiles were at a null point. As good as dead because they had no hope. A hopelessness so dense that mere words of reassurance could not cut through their despair. But Ezekiel invites his fellow exiles to view a new reality of

hope through God's eyes, in a vision where the zero breeds new algebras. Consider the crucifixion and death of Jesus. The hopelessness of Good Friday, and the Roman form of execution, the cross, were the starkest of "zeroes." The hardest of deaths for Jesus, and the hardest of deaths for his friend's hopes. And yet that instrument of a scandalous and disgraceful death has become a powerful symbol of hope. The symbol showing us that nothing and no one is beyond the power of God's redemption and reconciliation. You see, the story of Jesus' resurrection is not just a story about Jesus. It is also a story about us. About how God sees us. Not as one or two hundred pounds of water, skin, and bones, but as vessels of God's own Spirit. A Spirit through which he works miracles even today. About how the hopelessness of Good Friday is transformed by God into the creativity of Easter morning. About how our one or two hundred pounds of water, skin, and bones become vessels of the living God.

Ezekiel hears the rush of wind and feels the stirring of a breeze. The newly en fleshed bones are animated by God's Spirit. The text plays pleasingly on the Hebrew word ruah. Because ruah means wind, breath, and spirit all three. It can even mean singing and laughter. As in Genesis chapter 1, which can be translated that God sang or laughed the world into existence. These alternative translations and meanings of ruah are used interchangeably. We use them that way also. We talk about a "second wind." When we run and run, we need the "second wind" to keep on running. We talk about being inspired. We talk about a "breath" of fresh air. *In the valley of dry bones*, as a result of God's ruah, chests rise and fall.

Neither nature nor nurture can give Ezekiel this vision of bones coming together, becoming encased in flesh, and animated by the wind. Everything his natural eyes reveal, tell him these people are hopeless. So much for nature. Everything in his upbringing and in his culture reveals that without land and that without sovereignty, there is no hope. So much for nurture. Neither nature nor nurture can give Ezekiel hope. But Ezekiel looks upon the hopeless situation of the children of Israel, not through the eyes of nature or nurture, but through the eyes of God. Through God's eyes. Through the eyes of faith. Through the eyes of trust in God's promises. And Ezekiel sees hope. With Ezekiel, we watch as ligaments bind the bones together. As flesh blankets them. As skin seals them tightly. We watch as God's Spirit, God's breath, God's laughter, and yes, God's song, infuses into them, healing hopelessness, so that they rise up to do God's work. The bones become living people and begin to do the fulfilling and purposeful and meaningful dance of God's work. When we raise our vision to look beyond what our mundane eyes can see, we watch the impossible happen through God's eyes. Though the desert be bone dry and smell of decay, and the promised land far, far, away, we can glimpse unimagined reasons to keep on hoping. We glimpse a future through the eyes of God, through whom all things are possible.

Theologian Frederick Buechner, in an article on Hope, writes, "Christianity is mainly wishful thinking. Sometimes wishing is the wings the truth comes true on." In other words, if you can't dream it, you can't have it. But if you dare to dream, perhaps . . . just perhaps.

Such hope is more than idle daydreaming. It is a life-giving power as real as the invisible energy from the electrical outlet on the wall. Karl Menninger tells about a group of doctors who survived the horrors of slave labor in a World War II concentration camp. Each night they secretly came together and shared their experiences in a small group. They believed someday what they were learning and sharing would be of benefit to the world. While scores of other prisoners around them died every week, almost all of the doctors lived. As Menninger put it, "They were kept alive by hope."

Is it any wonder the most lively committees and organizations of the church are those which have developed a goal, a vision of the future, and are eagerly working toward it?

A vision of the future, what we call hope, is the greatest animating force we know. Notice, though, to be realistic, hope must trust in a power greater than the problem it faces. For many problems of the world, there is only one power great enough to encourage hope. That's why Ezekiel was quick to envision God breathing on those dry bones bringing them alive. No one else could perform such a miracle. This kind of hope is more than just wishful thinking. It is the absolute confidence the future will be good because the future is God's.

Like exiles 2500 years ago, we too can at times feel good, or as bad, as dead. We feel null and void inside. But if we look at our situation through God's eyes, we can see a bigger picture, and a basis for our hope. Impossible, say our nature and our nurture. Impossible, say our physical senses and our culture. But look at those dry bones through God's eyes, and be prepared for your world to be turned upside down!

The Psalmist cries from out of the depths of despair. But the dry bones in Ezekiel's vision cannot clothe themselves with flesh. Only God can send God's Spirit. Only God can breathe, can laugh, and can sing renewal into human life. Human beings cannot solve their own problems. We seek God's Spirit, God's laughter, God's breath, in Bible study, worship, and prayer.

### Scene 3

Our hope is in the word of the Lord. THAT IS WHY THE SCRIPTURES ARE SO IMPORTANT TO OUR LIVES.

There is an old story about a bandit in a foreign land who had been badly injured and was taken to a Christian mission hospital. As the result of weeks of excellent

care, the bandit recovered completely. He was so grateful for the treatment he received that he resolved he would never again rob a Christian. The word got around, and everyone he tried to hold up would immediately say, "I'm a Christian." Obviously, this was bad for his business. So he went back to the hospital and asked the missionaries how he could distinguish who really were Christians. They said, "Well, every Christian should know the Lord's Prayer, John 3:16, and the Golden Rule." And from that time on, he would tell his intended victims to recite the Lord's Prayer, John 3:16, and the Golden Rule. If they could not, he would rob them.

How would you fare on such a quiz? Many of us are practically illiterate when it comes to the Scriptures. Thus we miss a tremendous source of comfort and strength. A brilliant writer came upon the Bible only in her mature life, never having read or studied it until then. "I feel so bitterly," she wrote in her journal, "that I have never known these writings before. They ought to be part of my very breathing." That is true of all of us. Particularly when we are in the valley of dry bones. We need the written Word of the Lord. It will give us comfort and strength.

Our hope is in the Word of the Lord. That is why the Scriptures are so important to our lives.

THAT IS ALSO WHY WORSHIP IS SO IMPORTANT TO OUR LIVES. In worship we also discover the Word of the Lord for our lives.

Some years ago a speedboat driver was near top speed when his boat veered slightly and hit a wave at a dangerous angle. The combined force of his speed and the size and angle of the wave sent the boat spinning crazily into the air. He was thrown from his seat and propelled deeply into the water--so deep, in fact, that he had no idea which direction the surface was. He had to remain calm and wait for the buoyancy of his life vest to begin pulling him up. Once he discovered which way was up, he could swim for the surface.

Worship is that time in the week when we wait calmly so that we can rediscover which way is up. Particularly is this important when we are in the valley.

In his book *BELIEVE AND BELONG*, Bruce Larson tells about a gigantic statue of Atlas in the entrance of the RCA Building on Fifth Avenue in New York City. Here is Atlas, this beautifully proportioned man who, with all his muscles straining, is holding the world upon his shoulders. Even though he is the most powerfully built man on earth, he can barely stand up under this burden. "Now that's one way to live," Larson says, "trying to carry the world on your shoulders."

On the other side of Fifth Avenue, Larson notes, is Saint Patrick's Cathedral, and there behind the high altar is a little shrine of the boy Jesus. He is perhaps eight or nine years old, and with no effort he is holding the world in one hand.

"We have a choice." says Larson. "We can carry the world on our shoulders, or we can say, 'I give up, Lord; here's my life. I give you my world, the whole world.'" For many of us this hour of worship is that time when we shift our burden from our shoulders to His. We find our strength in the word of the Lord. That is why the Scriptures are important to us. That is why Worship is important to us.

FINALLY, THAT IS WHY PRAYER IS SO IMPORTANT TO US. When you are in the valley of dry bones is when you discover that prayer is more than a mere ritual at mealtime or before retiring.

A pastor was visiting in the home of one of his parishioners. A small boy in the home started reaching for the potatoes before the blessing was said. His mother gently scolded him. The boy was confused. Why were they at the table, except to eat? As the adults bowed their heads to say grace, the child suddenly caught on. As his father started to pray, the boy, shouted, "Hey, Dad! Could I be the one that talks to the plate this time?"

Some people could easily be talking to their plates, their prayers have so little forethought and passion. Such is not the case for those who have been in the valley. In the darkness of the valley we have reached out and felt an unseen hand.

When Norris Dam was first built in the hills of East Tennessee, a worker on the night shift noticed how strange it was to hear the great dynamos humming in the quiet of the night and then look across the lake and see cabins lit with kerosene lamps. When he asked why this was, he was told that the transmission lines had not been laid yet. Even though these folks lived in the shadow of this great hydroelectric dam, they could not receive its power, because there were no lines linking the dam to their homes. So it is with many people today. They have no link with the One who can restore new life to dry bones. Prayer is that link.

What an exciting piece of news for us. God's Spirit gives us hope - in Bible study, in Worship, and through Prayer. This is from whence comes God's Spirit. God's Spirit of Hope which gives life even to dry bones.

An old sailor was standing on a dock with a little boy, looking out over the lake. They were watching sailboats. The little boy said, "Sailor, what is the wind?" The old sailor said, "Son, I can't tell you what the wind is. I can't explain it, but I know how to hoist a sail to catch its power so it can take me where I want to go."

I cannot explain the breath of God. I cannot explain the Spirit, but I have felt its power and I know it is real. I believe it is present for you also. Regardless of the circumstances in which you may find yourself, God is with us. So, I encourage you to hoist a sail and catch the wind. Open your heart and take a deep breath and God's Spirit will be with you. This is the Word of the Lord. You can trust it.