

## **Dry Bones LIVE!**

**March 29, 2020, The Fifth Sunday in Lent**

**Ezekiel 37:1-14**

**First Presbyterian Church**

### **Prayer for Illumination**

*Dry bones we are some days, O Lord, as dry as old Ezekiel's valley of dry bones. So open to us these old words, strange and haunting tale that they are. Bring them across the sands of time and blow them fresh into our dry days. And now may the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer. Amen.*

37The 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. 2He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. 3He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord God, you know." 4Then he said to me, "Prophesy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. 5Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. 6I 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." 7So 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. 8I 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. 9Then 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." 10I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

### Sermon

By all accounts, Ezekiel the prophet was one – strange – dude. Even by Old Testament standards he was an "odd duck" – with his dreams and visions, his altered states and psychic episodes. But like a lot of strange dudes, Ezekiel spoke the truth... and this morning we're going to try to hear at least some of that truth from him. A little background first: Ezekiel lived in absolutely the "worst of times" for a Jew. He was there in Jerusalem when the Babylonians came the first time in 597 BC. They conquered the city and carried half the population off into exile – Ezekiel was among them. And it was from this great city of "hanging gardens" that Ezekiel raved on and on. But then... ten years later... came even more devastating news – that the Babylonians had gone BACK to Jerusalem and absolutely obliterated it... turning the City of David into a city of death. It was with the news reports of this latest destruction still ringing in his ears... that Ezekiel had his dream. Swept up in one of his spirit-trances, he sees with his inner eye this bizarre scene of a valley filled with dry bones. I'm imagining it' something like the Elephant Graveyard in Disney's "The Lion King." Well, to a Hebrew, this phrase "dry bones" conveys a real sense of finality. You may know that when a Jew died, the practice was to first place the corpse in a tomb, allowing the flesh to decay. There the body would stay until there was nothing left but the dry bones. And only then would the bones be placed in an ossuary which would be their final resting place.

Ezekiel's dream was a dream of the end of the line... of utter desolation... of no chance for life. And as the prophet looked out on this grim scene, God asked him: "How can they ever live again?" Now, all these centuries later we are not reading the 37<sup>th</sup> chapter of Ezekiel simply because it's an interesting snippet of Jewish history. We read this story in church all these years later because that ancient valley of bones represents all the deep valleys that you and I pass through in life. This historical event of dashed hopes is emblem of our dashed hopes. This ancient sorrow is metaphor for all the sorrow of people everywhere; you and I included.<sup>1</sup> And I'm not only talking about what this virus is doing to us right now... though, talk about dashed hopes... talk about disappointment... talk about sorrow! But I'll be honest if you will... well before COVID-19, I looked into valleys of dry bones... I asked: "What could *ever* bring life again after this?" And I know most of you have too. Maybe it was the day you got the diagnosis... or the day you lost the job. The day the love of your life was snatched from you. The day somebody you trusted betrayed you. The day the newspaper headlines finally got to you. The morning you woke up and for some unknown reason nothing seemed to matter. Each of us over a certain age has, at one time or another, looked out over a figurative valley of dry bones... and when we have... like Ezekiel we are asked to do one thing... and asked to trust one thing. First, we are asked to be utterly honest about the fact that like every human being on earth, we pass through such valleys. This means being honest with God... it may also mean admitting to others that we have dark times. And always it means being honest with ourselves about the fact that we are human and sometimes tempted to lose hope. The truth is, of course, that most of us spend a lot of time and energy pretending this is not true. We dress up for each other in more ways than with fancy clothes, don't we? Kathleen Norris, poet and essayist who some of you may have read, was raised in the church, left the faith, and then found her way back again. She writes: "Church meant two things to me when I was little: dressing up and singing. I sang in choirs from the time I was four years old and for a long time believed that singing was the purpose of religion... but I have lately realized that what went wrong for me in my Christian upbringing is centered in the belief that one had to be dressed up, both outwardly and inwardly, to meet God..." an insidious notion. Ezekiel's vision asks this one thing of us: that we be honest enough to admit that there are dry bone days in our lives.

And then, I said it asks us to trust one thing. Given such valleys of bones, the prophet's question is this, "How can they ever live again?" Truth is this world has lots of answers for that and some of them are actually pretty good answers... just not quite good enough. For example - one of my personal favorites - these bones will live if you just work hard enough. Just throw your shoulder into it... think... plan... organize... figure it out... work harder and harder. And it's true - so much is accomplished every day by this world's "teeth-gritters" and "tireless plodders." But there are times... there ARE times... when sheer willpower and hard work are not quite enough.

A second pretty good answer is: "These bones will live if you just hang in there... have courage... be patient... time will heal." And so often that's true... time does heal... but not all wounds.

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Lindvall in "What Do You Need?" a sermon preached to Brick Presbyterian Church of New York City March 13, 2005.

And a third pretty decent answer: “These bones will live if you just have a better attitude.” Positive thinking is powerful... and I’m a big believer in attitude. But I also know there are times when a positive attitude is just not quite enough.

What breathes life into Ezekiel’s valley of dry bones is not anything in the bones themselves... what gives life is Spirit – with a capital S – the Spirit of the Living God.

These bones live...

NOT because they are hard-working bones.

NOT because they are clever bones... or patient bones...

NOT because they are bones with a good attitude.

They rise NOT because of anything IN THE BONES themselves but because of the Spirit of the Living God.

In the middle of the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln said something truly remarkable. This man who is perhaps the greatest President this country has ever had... this brilliant and confident and competent man, once said this: “I have been driven many times to my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere else to go. My wisdom and that all about me seemed insufficient for the day.” Lincoln’s deep wisdom was once captured by an elderly pillar of the church who had just heard her pastor explain JUST HOW DRY bones can really be: *Well sir, she exclaimed, if it’s as bad as all that, then heaven help us.*” Which is precisely the point... it is precisely Ezekiel’s point; “*Heaven help us.*”

Growing up Southern Baptist, we didn’t observe the liturgical year. In fact, I never heard of Lent until I was in seminary. And to be quite honest, it still seems a bit odd to me that we pass through these forty days sort of *pretending* that we don’t know what’s coming... pretending we don’t know that the cross is NOT the end of the story... pretending on Easter Sunday to be surprised that the tomb is empty. Yet, this is the promise which comes from this odd and zany prophet today: this is the promise we trust in the dry bone days of our lives... that the end of the story is not death... the last word is life... God is not done... and because of that – dry bones LIVE!

### **Charge and Benediction**

Last night I was watching the news and in response to a question, the person being interviewed said: “Right now as a nation we are all COVID- 19 - there's nothing more we think about, talk about, dream about. I understood what she was saying... and I agree, we are consumed by this virus and how to beat it and how our lives are changed as we do. But the preacher in me... a preacher who spent a good bit of time with Ezekiel this week... the preacher in me also wanted to push back and say, “There IS something MORE we think about... and talk about, and dream about – and as crazy as it might sound outside this room – we dream about a valley of dry bones... and we hear a rattling sound... and soon the bones are reconnected and new skin covers them... and from the four winds, the Spirit of the Living God inspires them... and they LIVE! Friends, the end of the story is not death... the last word is life... God is not done... and because of that – dry bones LIVE!