

Ezekiel 37:1-14 The LORD's power overcame me, and while I was in the LORD's spirit, he led me out and set me down in the middle of a certain valley. It was full of bones. ²He led me through them all around, and I saw that there were a great many of them on the valley floor, and they were very dry.

³He asked me, "Human one, can these bones live again?"

I said, "LORD God, only you know."

⁴He said to me, "Prophecy over these bones, and say to them, Dry bones, hear the LORD's word! ⁵The LORD God proclaims to these bones: I am about to put breath in you, and you will live again. ⁶I will put sinews on you, place flesh on you, and cover you with skin. When I put breath in you, and you come to life, you will know that I am the LORD."

⁷I prophesied just as I was commanded. There was a great noise as I was prophesying, then a great quaking, and the bones came together, bone by bone. ⁸When I looked, suddenly there were sinews on them. The flesh appeared, and then they were covered over with skin. But there was still no breath in them.

⁹He said to me, "Prophecy to the breath; prophecy, human one! Say to the breath, The LORD God proclaims: Come from the four winds, breath! Breathe into these dead bodies and let them live."

¹⁰I prophesied just as he commanded me. When the breath entered them, they came to life and stood on their feet, an extraordinarily large company.

¹¹He said to me, "Human one, these bones are the entire house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope has perished. We are completely finished.' ¹²So now, prophecy and say to them, The LORD God proclaims: I'm opening your graves! I will raise you up from your graves, my people, and I will bring you to Israel's fertile land. ¹³You will know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves and raise you up from your graves, my people. ¹⁴I will put my breath in you, and you will live. I will plant you on your fertile land, and you will know that I am the LORD. I've spoken, and I will do it. This is what the LORD says."

The word of God for the People of God. **Thanks be to God.**

Ezekiel's congregation...was a valley full of dry bones.

Actually, Ezekiel's congregation was the people of Israel, but at this point, there wasn't much difference. At the time when Ezekiel had this dry bone vision, God's people were doomed. Ezekiel wrote in the days when Israel was being exiled, carried off from their home, from the land that God had promised to them, from the temple that was the vital link, connecting them to God. They were being cut off. Ezekiel was part of the first round of exiles, moving from Jerusalem to Babylon. The first 32 chapters of his prophecy take place in a sort of "in between" time--Ezekiel and some of the others are already exiled in Babylon, but Jerusalem was still standing. The kingdom was still holding; hope was not lost. Then, in chapter 33, Ezekiel notes the exact date when the messenger arrived with the dreaded, inevitable news: Jerusalem has fallen.

It is the worst moment in their history. And it inspired words like these: My life is spent with sorrow, and my years with sighing; my strength fails because of my misery, and my bones waste away. Take a look throughout scripture at the use of the word "bones." You'll find it 17 times in the book of psalms. Psalm 22 says, "I'm poured out like water; all my bones have fallen apart."

Then 42: "With my bones crushed, my foes make fun of me, constantly questioning me, 'Where is your God now?'" Bones drying up, bones protruding, bones wearing out and falling apart; it seems that for the people of Israel, bones are the part of the body where we feel our deepest pain--the deep, deep pain of the soul. It's no mistake that the second most frequent talk of bones is in the book of Job. This is familiar to us, too. Like the Israelites, when life is at its utter ruin, we feel it in our bones. And here, in Ezekiel, Israel's bones are broken.

Dried up. "Our bones are dried up, and our hope has perished. We are completely finished."

Ezekiel finds a valley full of bones in his vision from God. This alone would be disturbing enough. Bones, piles of bones, human bones--evidence of what was once life, but all the more evidence that something has not gone as it should. These are not the bones of those who died of natural causes. These are bones of a shallow grave or a battlefield; bones that no one took care to collect and bury properly. We think surely this must simply be a vision, surely a valley like this couldn't possibly exist today. But I don't know. We wouldn't need to go back far in our history--perhaps to the concentration camps of Nazi Germany. Even today, seeking a vision of dry bones, I think we could start by looking along our border to the South, where one body after another has met an unexpected, unknown death. Bones that have been left, out in the elements, to decay, to dry. And they were, as Ezekiel notes, very dry.

"Can these bones live?" It seems odd for God to ask the question; more likely **God** ought to be answering this one, and Ezekiel is just ornery enough to put it back to God: "Only you know the answer to that one, Lord." But God doesn't let him off the hook so easily.

Prophecy over these bones, Mortal One! Ezekiel was to preach. And his congregation was a bunch...of bones. What do you mean, prophecy to the bones, what sort of God are you? That's what I would've asked. Preach to a bunch of long-since-dead bones? Try to stir up hope within something that is not only hopeless, but lifeless? Here's an idea, God, how about first you bring these bones back to life, and then I'll have someone to preach to, because I've never seen a bone stand up on its own and shout amen!

It's a fool's errand, preaching to dead bones. It's pointless, their death is a foregone conclusion, they are already dead and finished! Surely Ezekiel should spend his time with actual people with whom he might actually have some success? Because preaching to bones...it's hard to imagine how one might possibly...succeed.

You know, come to think of it, I bet you've seen this vision. There is someone in your life, some people, who everyone has already given up on. Some marriage, some patient, some neighborhood, some child that everyone has told you to give up on. Get over it; it's not going to get any better; that's just the way the world is, that's just the way life is. They're not going to change. Those bones are long-since-dead, dried up. Can these bones live? Everyone else would say no. Maybe even that person, the bones themselves, would say no.

But not all hope is lost. Can these bones live? There is one--maybe it's you--one who just can't say no. One who just can't help but think there is a chance, a chance for what is long-since-dead to come back to life again, one who, even so timidly answers not with the affirmative--not

saying "Yes! These bones will live!" but simply willing to leave it to God--to believe that God could, that God might, bring new life again. Well then, God says, preach. Prophecy to the bones, human one. Tell them what I'm about to do.

Notice God doesn't say, "Tell these bones what to do, how to get themselves together; tell them where to go to find some sinews and how they can produce some flesh, and if they work hard enough the wind will blow and bring them breath"--no, there's something instructive here about preaching, about prophesying. Ezekiel's prophecy is not all about "5 steps to a better you," here's how to bring yourself back to life. What God asks of Ezekiel is simply to declare what God will do. And maybe that's not just the job of the prophet, or the preacher. Maybe that's the job of every one of us, to enter the desperate places of the world and announce just what God can do. Not that God will fix each situation to each person's liking, not that everyone will walk away with a new car, but that God is in the business of moving people, and families, and neighborhoods, and refugee camps, and orphanages, and drug houses, and even graveyards, from death to life.

This is why we keep going back, again and again, to the places where death is a foregone conclusion. Dr. Craig Barnes asks, "Why does the church keep pouring out its little cup of water into the West Bank, Sudan and other desperate places of the world where hope has run dry? Why do we keep visiting the shut-ins and those in hospitals when we have no miracle drug to take away their pain? Why do we commit ourselves to the political process when there is so much cynicism and a malaise of despair in politics today? Why? Because God is not done." Friends, if there ever was a biblical case to abolish the death penalty, Ezekiel has just made it. God is not done yet. Death need not be a foregone conclusion for anyone. God is at work putting dead things back together, bringing them to a point where they are ready to be filled with the breath, the spirit, that gave them life in the first place.

When we reach verse 9, God really gets the preacher preaching. We can't hear it as well in English, but in its original Hebrew God taps, taps, taps, like a hammer on the same word: Ruah. God says, "Prophecy to the Ruah, human one! Say to the Ruah, The Lord God proclaims: Come from the four Ruahs, Ruah! Breathe into these dead bodies and let them live."

Ruah. It's the word for breath; but it's also the word for wind; and it's also the word for Spirit. It's the same word that we find when it all began, when the Earth was a dark and formless void and God's spirit, God's wind, the Ruah Adonai, swept over the waters, just as God was about to declare the creation into being. Ezekiel makes it clear, what God is doing here is not just resurrection--God is doing a new creation.

God not only can put the pieces back together, but God has the spirit, the wind, the breath, the Ruah to re-create it--to re-create us! To bring about new creation--this is what Paul is talking about in our passage from Corinthians. For him, this promise is centered directly on Christ. If anyone is in Christ, new creation--it's not just that if anyone is in Christ, he or she is a new creation! That alone would be good enough, but no, that's not big enough for this God--if anyone is in Christ, BAM!--new creation. The whole creation is made new again.

The promise you must hear today is that God can take even the deadest thing and bring life. What is old, and dead, and left out to dry, can become the most magnificent work of God's new creation. God declares to a pile of dry bones, "You will live again." And today I say it to you: You will live again. You who think you've got nothing left. You who have lost another job. You who have the odds stacked against you. You who have been deemed a failure. You will live again. You will live again. By the breath of God, you will live again.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.