

Ezekiel 37: 1-14

Breath of Life

¹⁻² God grabbed me. God's Spirit took me up and set me down in the middle of an open plain strewn with bones. He led me around and among them—a lot of bones! There were bones all over the plain—dry bones, bleached by the sun.

³ He said to me, "Son of man, can these bones live?"

I said, "Master God, only you know that."

⁴ He said to me, "Prophecy over these bones: 'Dry bones, listen to the Message of God!'"

⁵⁻⁶ God, the Master, told the dry bones, "Watch this: I'm bringing the breath of life to you and you'll come to life. I'll attach sinews to you, put meat on your bones, cover you with skin, and breathe life into you. You'll come alive and you'll realize that I am God!"

⁷⁻⁸ I prophesied just as I'd been commanded. As I prophesied, there was a sound and, oh, rustling! The bones moved and came together, bone to bone. I kept watching. Sinews formed, then muscles on the bones, then skin stretched over them. But they had no breath in them.

⁹ He said to me, "Prophecy to the breath. Prophecy, son of man. Tell the breath, 'God, the Master, says, Come from the four winds. Come, breath. Breathe on these slain bodies. Breathe life!'"

¹⁰ So I prophesied, just as he commanded me. The breath entered them and they came alive! They stood up on their feet, a huge army.

¹¹ Then God said to me, "Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. Listen to what they're saying: 'Our bones are dried up, our hope is gone, there's nothing left of us.'

¹²⁻¹⁴ "Therefore, prophesy. Tell them, 'God, the Master, says: I'll dig up your graves and bring you out alive—O my people! Then I'll take you straight to the land of Israel. When I dig up graves and bring you out as my people, you'll realize that I am God. I'll breathe my life into you and you'll live. Then I'll lead you straight back to your land and you'll realize that I am God. I've said it and I'll do it. God's Decree.'"

Ezekiel: Dry Bones and Fresh Air

Well, now, that's a little strange. Sounds like some science fiction or horror movie or like the scene in Pirates of the Caribbean where all the Pirates become skeletons and back to pirates again. But then Ezekiel is something of a strange guy – always talking about visions and weird dreams – always engaging in strange activities and doing weird things (eating a holy scroll – shaving his hair and beard – cooking in a corroded pot).

His vision of a "wheel within a wheel" was the basis a few years back for people saying that aliens from outer space once visited the earth. They said the description that Ezekiel gave matched that of a flying saucer.

Let's face it, Ezekiel was or at least the stories about Ezekiel are odd. Who was this guy?

Ezekiel was another of those old testament prophets – a person chosen by God to lay it out to people living about 600 years before the birth of Jesus. He was a contemporary of Jeremiah living in the southern Kingdom of Judah as the Babylonian empire began its ascendancy.

A little history lesson sets the stage for today:

King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon had defeated Pharaoh Neco of Egypt. The King of Judah - Jehoiakim – placed himself and his country under Babylonian rule as a vassal state. After 3 years he rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar. Within 4 years Jerusalem was encircled and besieged. At that critical moment Jehoiakim died – whether from assassination or sickness we do not know. His 18 year old son, Jehoiachin, surrendered to Nebuchadnezzar. Jerusalem was overrun, valuables were plundered from the people, the palace and the Temple but the itself and its Temple were not harmed. Though it was now under Babylonian domination, Judah remained an independent nation with a new king. Jehoiachin, the officers, the fighting men, the craftsmen and artisans, and all the leading men of the land were deported to Babylon. Most scholars think that Ezekiel was in this group of exiles.

While in Babylon Ezekiel heard what happened next. Zedekiah, the next king of Judah, also rebelled against Babylon. The long and the short of that is that the rebellion failed. The king's sons and a large part of his army were put to death. Jerusalem was laid waste, nothing was left standing. The Temple was burned to the ground, the stones scattered, and the remaining people were deported. Jerusalem and Judah were no more. All that was left were the "skeletal remains" scattered on a dry plain. You simply don't mess with Babylon.

This event directly challenged all of the ways that people thought about God. The destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, the scattering of the people and the Babylonian exile did away with the simple notion that God would protect "the chosen people." It seemed to suggest that God had no people, that the promise to the chosen ones was null and void. All the history of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob - Moses, Joshua, Ruth, and David appeared to have been simply swept away. It was the end of the world as they knew it. The future appeared empty and hopeless.

That's when the Spirit of God leads Ezekiel to this valley of dry bones. These were not fresh bones with a

little flesh left on them. They were old, dry, sun bleached bones that had been there for a long time.

So the Spirit of God asks Ezekiel: Mortal man (and there's nothing like a field full of skeletal remains to remind one that we are indeed mortal) "Mortal man – Can these bones live?"

Well it would certainly seem unlikely, but Ezekiel was used to dealing with God and gave an answer that covered all bets: "O Lord God, only you know."

God responds: " 'Dry bones, listen to the Message of God!' I'm bringing the breath of life to you and you'll come to life. I'll attach sinews to you, put meat on your bones, cover you with skin,"

Now God was doing more than performing CPR – more than asking Ezekiel to call a code or 911 and so that a dead body could be resuscitated. God was telling Ezekiel about how this deconstructed, disassembled, nearly decomposed heap of nothing was going to be **resurrected** – not back into something that once was – but into a new creation made possible by the breath of God – the infusing of the fresh wind of the Spirit.

And the bones began to reassemble, tendons and ligaments and muscle appeared on the bones, and blood

vessels, nerves and flesh returned. But they still probably looked like part of that traveling science exhibit that has real bodies preserved in plastic that demonstrate the anatomy but there is nothing else - there was no animation - these were just recreated bodies - until God breathed the divine spark within, until the wind blew and fanned the flame, and the Spirit burst in like some combustible power, and there they stood - ***alive!***

“ I will breathe life into you. You'll come alive and you'll realize that I am God!”

(In other words) NOW - You will realize who is the creator and who is the creature. Without this breath of the Spirit – you will be breathless.

Unlike the people of Judah, we are not faced with living as exiles from a place that has physically leveled and scattered. In many ways, we are more like the Babylonians than the Judeans. We live in the empire that is politically and economically dominate in the world.

But as a community of faith we may be a community that is in exile from the predominate culture. We live in a culture where value seems to be measured in money, power and possessions – where a rookie pitcher gets paid 15 million dollars and a rookie teachers gets

\$25,000. We live in a culture where profits too often trump principles and where the politics of the powerful manipulate policies that will benefit ordinary people.

Our valley of dry bones is not found among the ruins of a temple or the destruction of a city but wherever people make idols of their opinions, their pride, their power, prejudices, possessions, and pleasures. The valley of dry bones is where the skeletons lay of all those who refused to wear the mantle of humility or admit their need for re-direction and restoration. Those skeletons may be dressed well and have closets full of clothes, they may drive upscale vehicles and park them in 5 car garages – they may live in McMansions and have manicured lawns - but dry bones they remain.

That is why Ezekiel calls to us today. Why his message is as relevant to us as it was to the people living 600 years before Christ. His call is to remind us that as people of God we are called to be different than the culture. We live by a different ethic – we live by a different value. We are different than our culture because we value the least of God's creatures more than we do ourselves and we wait for – we long for - that fresh wind that will restore- refresh and energize us.

God is ready to blow such a wind through us – through you , the fresh breath of re-creation. It is amazing what can happen as a result for that breath has an amazing power. It takes the fear and deadness we carry inside and blows it away. It enables us to dream again. It gives us that ability to see ourselves as God sees us. When God looks at us – God doesn't see a bunch of dry bones. God sees the potential – God sees the purpose for each of our lives and the purpose of this community of faith. God's Spirit heals any hopelessness so that we can rise up and be fully alive – functional and purpose full!

The God that raised up from the dead the community of Israel -- the Holy Spirit that sought out a band of scared disciples and created a the church -- this is the presence and the power that can energize us, and lead us as we go about the tasks of remembrance, forgiveness, and visioning and then do the WORK that awaits us. Putting bone back together to bone may be painful, - those who have had broke bones or joint replacement can tell you that. Layering tendons, muscle, and skin may be exhausting work, those who have had knee or shoulder surgery can testify to that. We may not be the people we once were – but we will be the people we are meant to be.

In Ezekiel we have images of what we're to be doing. The stories in Ezekiel are not texts about science or history. They are metaphors. God, through Ezekiel's dreams and visions is trying to show people an image that will demonstrate how we are to live.

Within our community we are to be charged to reflect those images – those metaphors to others.

Adopt a Highway and Recycling are metaphors. We're not going to solve the problem of litter and waste – but we demonstrate and declare to the community that we value the earth and our role as stewards.

The Free Clinic is a metaphor. We're not going to solve the problem of health care through the clinic – but we demonstrate and declare to the community that God asks us to care for one another. It is something we value.

Habitat for Humanity is a metaphor. We're not going to solve the problem of affordable housing – but we demonstrate and declare that we value the fact that all people need a place to call home and a safe shelter in which to live.

Those timbers lying on the lawn are a metaphor. We're not going to supply fresh fruits and vegetables to the world but we demonstrate and declare to the community that we value the resources of nature and the stewardship of what we've been given.

Friendship Room is a metaphor. We're not going to solve the problem of hunger and poverty – but we demonstrate and declare that hungry people need to be feed.

Gathering together on Sunday morning is a metaphor. We're not likely to seem relevant or important to people who think that we're wasting our time – but in our gathering we declare that experiencing the presence of God and setting aside a time and place for that to occur may very well be the most valuable hour in our week.

“Can these bones live?”

In this hour – in this time and place - God renews the promise ‘ I will breath life Even into the driest of the dry bones, I will breath hope even into the most disassembled of those heaps on the plain. I will breath life into you – and you will live. I said it – I'll do it. God's decree!

Let us pray:

Creator God, you have fashioned us to reflect your will and your way in the world. You call upon us to demonstrate what is valuable in your sight. May we have the energy, the time, the resources and the patience to live faithfully as we follow the way of the prophets and the life of our Lord. Amen.

Ever present God,
your gift to us is life.

May we be empowered to embrace life's possibilities with positive energy.
May we be helped to deal with our self-doubts,
to control our inner fears,
to lessen our self-criticism and our criticism of others.

May we be helped to find that inner release
and that outer confirmation
to live life fully;
with God
with nature
and with all other people.
(Silence)

This gift of life has provided us with many excellent experiences,
and a range of possibilities are before us every day.
May we have an attitude of openness that draws us towards
the best experiences
and the best possibilities.

And may we be prompted to be more expansive and more inclusive
as we accept our responsibility
to make God's reign visible
through gracious generosity and active service.
(Silence)

We recognise that the world will be a better place for more people
as we combine our concern for
personal objectives, achievements and success,
with real efforts to create conditions
for an informed community awareness, and social change.

May we live out this concern and this effort.

May people see in us the spirit of
appreciation,
gratitude, and
generous self-giving, we have seen in Jesus and in whose name we pray
together: