

Michelle Bacon, guest preacher
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Ezekiel 37:1-14
“Can these dry bones live?”

This year, more than any other year, I am so ready for Easter to come. I'm sure our unusually wintry weather has something to do with it. There is something in me this year that feels tired and dry. I would really like to skip over these last days of Lent and enter the joyous celebration of Easter. The last place I want to go is to a graveyard, but that is where our morning lessons take us, and yet, what better place than a graveyard to recognize our need for transformation. How could we honestly rejoice on Easter morning if we don't stop and take an honest look at ourselves and open our hearts to transformation.

Ezekiel is taken by the Spirit, the breath, the wind of the Lord and placed in the middle of a valley; a valley full of dry bones. The Spirit leads Ezekiel among the bones. It reminds me of pictures of Cambodia where the bones of the victims of the Khmer Rouge are stacked in rows upon rows. The pictures of Rwanda, or Darfur, where the bones of the victims of genocide have been displayed; each skeleton a person whose life had been cut off. Skeleton after skeleton, person after person, the numbers are staggering and the finality of death overwhelming. It is a haunting place to be.

The people of Israel had described themselves in this way. “Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are clean cut off.” In this text, Israel is not the victim of a systematic genocide. The Israelites are not all dead, but they feel as though they are, because they feel cut off from God and completely without hope. They are in exile in Babylon. King Nebuchadnezer of Babylon laid siege to Jerusalem and carried most of the ruling class into captivity in Babylon. Ezekiel included. Eventually, Jerusalem falls and the temple is destroyed. The temple was God's dwelling place. If it was destroyed how could God be present with them? This was the religious tradition this generation of Israelites knew. God dwelled in the temple and this protected the surrounding city of Jerusalem. But now, their circumstances had changed. Jerusalem had been invaded, they were in exile in Babylon, and the temple destroyed. Their tradition is turned upside down. Their theology is unable to speak to their current situation. They are cut off from their land and their temple. They think they are cut off from God; from their source of life. They had no hope. They felt as though they were dead. Their bones were dried up.

The Lord asks Ezekiel, “Can these bones live?” The Israelites thought they knew the answer to that question. “No, these bones cannot live.” The temple is destroyed and we have been moved to another land. We are cut off from the Lord God. These bones cannot live. We silently ask the same question. Can brokenness be restored to wholeness? Can separations be united? Can a hopeless situation become hopeful? Is transformation truly possible? Can dry bones become living breathing beings again? Can these bones live?

There is no human way that would be possible, but Ezekiel wisely responds with “O Lord God, you know.” God then explains to Ezekiel how this transformation will take place. Ezekiel is to speak the word of the Lord to the dry bones and the Lord will cause breath/wind/Spirit to enter them and they will live and know that God is the Lord. It is God's breath/wind/ Spirit that brings life. Ezekiel dramatically tells how when he speaks the word of the Lord to the bones they begin to come together. Ligaments and tendons join them. Muscle and skin cover them, but there is no breath/wind/ Spirit in them. The bones have become bodies, but they are not yet living. God tells Ezekiel to speak God's words to the breath/wind/Spirit. Ezekiel tells the breath/wind/Spirit to come from the four winds, from all directions and breathe on these not yet resuscitated bodies. In this God tells the Israelites through Ezekiel that God's Spirit moves throughout the whole earth, as the four winds move throughout the earth. God's Spirit cannot be contained in a temple. Like the wind, God is mobile and dynamic and not under our control.

When the people of Israel were wandering in the desert after their exodus from Egypt, God led them by a pillar of cloud and a pillar of fire. God was mobile and dynamic. Later, God dwelt among them in the Tent of Meeting, a portable structure that they carried with them wherever they went. This was the original understanding, or Tradition of how God was with God's people. The temple was a permanent, stable, certain

structure and over time shaped how the Israelites perceived God. For this generation in exile it was the only tradition they knew and now they are distraught; distraught because their understanding of God, their theology no longer works in their present condition. Ezekiel with his play on words – Spirit/breath/wind – reminds the Israelites of their original understanding of God and what it means to them in their setting. God’s Spirit is like the wind. It is not static. It is not restricted by boundaries of time and space. God’s Spirit is dynamic and mobile, often moving and acting in ways we do not expect. God’s Spirit is the breath of life. It is a power loose in the world stronger than their fear of separation from God, stronger than death. It is a power able to raise them from their graves, able to make their dry bones live.

About a week ago, an extensive new survey by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life was released. You may have heard about it in the news. It details the religious affiliation of the American public and explores the shifts taking place in the U.S. religious landscape. According to this survey, more than one-quarter of American adults (28%) have left the faith in which they were raised in favor of another religion – or no religion at all. The survey also finds that the number of people who say they are unaffiliated with any particular faith today (16.1%) is more than double the number who say they were not affiliated with any particular religion as children. Among Americans ages 18-29, one-in-four say they are not currently affiliated with any particular religion. The Landscape Survey confirms that the United States is on the verge of becoming a minority Protestant country; the number of Americans who report that they are members of Protestant denominations now stands at barely 51%.

America’s mainline Protestant churches might be described by some as “dry bones.” Although statistically they are in decline, there are many individual churches that are flourishing. Diana Butler Bass conducted an extensive three-year study of centrist and progressive churches across the country and found this to be true. Her findings are summarized in *Christianity for the Rest of Us: How the Neighborhood Church is Transforming the Faith*. I would like to read a brief excerpt to you:

“The fifty congregations involved in my study were not usually the largest in their towns. Rather, they were solid, healthy churches that exhibited Christian authenticity, expressed a coherent faith, and offered members ways of living with passion and purpose. They exuded a renewed sense of mission and identity, often having emerged from dire circumstances of decline, crisis, threatened closure, or spiritual ennui. The congregations embraced no evangelistic strategy, no programmatic style of church growth. Rather, they were their own best selves – creative and traditional, risk-taking and grounded, confident and humble, open and orthodox...The churches along my way had not closed their eyes to change. Indeed, they were wide-eyed congregations in which new things were happening, lives were being transformed, and grassroots communal actions offered new possibilities for the body politic. None of the congregations I visited practiced business-as-usual church. All were reaching toward a future they could not fully see – a future of faith, hope, and love.”

Diana Butler Bass tells of churches revitalized because they have opened themselves to the transformation of God’s Spirit. In this Lenten season are we willing to say yes to God’s transforming power? As we stand with Ezekiel in the graveyard we know how desperately we need it. The graphs at our annual church meeting showed in black and white that our church has been losing members and pledges for many years. Once we move past the denial it is easy to feel hopeless.

The truth Ezekiel speaks to the exiled Israelites is true for us today. God’s Spirit is a transforming power loose in the world. It is stronger than death, stronger than our fear of death and it is able to call us out of our graves into the fullness and sweet mystery of life in communion with God and one another.

To regain their hope, the people of Israel had to hear the Word of the Lord from Ezekiel, the prophet God had placed among them to lead them. Are we willing to listen to the prophets among us, to Tom and Michelle and the members of Session, whose leadership we promised to follow, as they discern God’s Word to this congregation? Ezekiel challenged their theology, their tradition, which limited God’s activity and power. Are we willing to challenge our own traditions? Are we willing to exchange that which limits God’s activity and power for that which embraces the wind-like Spirit of God? As individuals do we really want our graves to be opened and our grave clothes unbound? We each have areas of brokenness in our life that we think are beyond God’s reach, beyond God’s ability to heal and restore. And so, our bones dry up. We become cynical and hopeless. We hold our breath. Instead, will you take a deep breath with me? Will you allow the breath of

life, God's Spirit to transform you? Brokenness can be made whole. Separations can be united. Hope can be restored. Dry bones can live and breathe again.