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Ezekiel 37:1-14

*New Life*

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NRSV

The hand of the Lord came upon me, and brought me out by the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. The Lord led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. The Lord said to me, “Mortal, can these bones live?” I answered, “O Lord God, you know.” Then the Lord said to me, “Prophesy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. I 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.” So 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. I 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. Then the Lord 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.” I prophesied as the Lord commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude. Then the Lord said to me, “Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.’ Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord God: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act, says the Lord.”

Yesterday we saw the new world’s largest dinosaur exhibit at the Perot Science Museum. One dinosaur was as big as four city buses parked bumper to bumper. The legs of this dinosaur were as wide and as tall as trees! And his neck alone was 30 feet long! As I looked at those bones, I thought of Ezekiel and the valley of dry bones that he envisioned.

Do you know that the book of Ezekiel was compellingly imaginative that in strict Jewish circles young people were not permitted to read it alone. This is a dangerous vision! God breathes new life into the valley of dry bones, and suddenly, there were enough living people standing to form a large army. This vision was probably written soon after the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple in 586 BC. Ezekiel urged his devastated nation to look beyond that catastrophe to a future that promised the restoration of the whole community by the action of God’s spirit. As I read it, I can imagine the writer of the zombie movies taking all these words literally.

It is the Lord who takes the initiative to restore life to the dry bones. The people had lost all hope of restoration but God insists that not only will they be given a new life, but they also will return to their homeland. Just as God breathed life into the creation in Genesis 2, and breathed life into the dry bones in Ezekiel’s vision, God’s breath gives us new life and sustains us every moment.

Today there are many who have had their lives ravaged by the storms that happened Thursday. It feels like their homes, their schools, their businesses are lying in ruins. Others are facing unknown futures as their endure layoffs, and are unsure of how bills will be paid. Many are struggling with an illness no one sees, struggling to make it through each day against the waves of depression. As we look at the world around us, it is easy to become discouraged and wonder about God’s presence in the midst of all the despair.

The prophet Ezekiel lived during one of the darkest times in the history of God’s people. The Babylonians had conquered their land and carried many people off into captivity. The nation of Israel experienced tremendous physical and emotional losses. Their confidence in themselves and in God was at an all-time low. The people needed to be reminded about the God who loved them and sustained them. The people needed to have their hope restored and their vision enlarged and the Spirit provided Ezekiel with an experience that still speaks to us today.

“Mortal, can these bones live?” Uh, maybe, I don’t know. I don’t think so. Could God work a miracle in the life of a nation that appeared as good as dead? Ezekiel knew that God had delivered them from slavery and given them the land, but that was in the past and now the Babylonians are in charge. “Can these bones lives?” Not in this current world, not when Ezekiel looked with the eyes of reality. But with the eyes of faith was a different story.

Ezekiel is called to imagine a future filled with hope, boldly proclaiming promise even while those around him are uttering words of despair. My favorite part of Ezekiel’s vision is that it is only when Ezekiel has prophesied to the bones that they live. It is only when the prophet proclaims the word of God to the bones that they begin to reassemble and be covered with flesh. But there is no breath in the bones and Ezekiel has to speak to bring breath to those bones. At each step of the miracle, God uses Ezekiel to proclaim the divine words and to announce the new thing that God is about to do in the midst of the valley of dry bones.

“Can these bones live?” Only if Ezekiel participates and names the acts of God. God wants human witnesses to speak of God’s miracles of life.

The school system in a large city had a program to help children keep up with their school work during stays in the city's hospitals. One day a teacher who was assigned to the program received a call asking her to visit a particular child. She took the child's name and room number and talked briefly with the child's regular class teacher. "We're studying nouns and adverbs in his class now," the regular teacher said, "and I'd be grateful if you could help him understand them so he doesn't fall too far behind."  The hospital program teacher went to see the boy that afternoon. No one had mentioned to her that the boy had been badly burned and was in great pain. Upset at the sight of the boy, she stammered as she told him, "I've been sent by your school to help you with nouns and adverbs." When she left she felt she hadn't accomplished much.

But the next day, a nurse asked her, "What did you do to that boy?" The teacher felt she must have done something wrong and began to apologize. "No, no," said the nurse. "You don't know what I mean. We've been worried about that little boy, but ever since yesterday, his whole attitude has changed. He's fighting back, responding to treatment. It's as though he's decided to live."  Two weeks later the boy explained that he had completely given up hope until the teacher arrived. Everything changed when he came to a simple realization. He said, "They wouldn't send a teacher to work on nouns and adverbs with a dying boy, would they?"

As I look at the world around me, I find myself surrounded by piles of dry bones. There are individuals, communities, and nations that are at the end of their ropes. I look around and there is great reason for despair. We are wandering in “the valley of the shadow of death” and some around us seem to have no reason to hope. We are surrounded by a broken and hurting world. People all around us ask, “Can these bones live?”

That is why God needs prophets in the valley today. God needs men and women who will stand knee-deep in bones and proclaim that death and destruction do not have the final word.

I was talking to a friend this week who has been looking for a job since Christmas. But most recently he said he’s been doing it in a half-hearted way, because he’s lost hope. So I encouraged him and I spoke to the bones in a seemingly hopeless situation, and then I talked with God and asked God’s Spirit to breathe life into that situation. God needs us to remind those who are lost, alone, and afraid that God will “bring you up from your graves . . . put God’s spirit within you, and you shall live.”

Lent is a time for us to grow closer to God and for us to realize the way of our lives is a long way from the way of Jesus. How many of us after Lent will go back to our old ways, no longer spending as much time in prayer, in Bible Study, and no longer fasting? We are Ezekiel's dry bones, waiting for a fresh breath of the spirit to give us new sinew and flesh and skin so that we might become whole again.

It is God who will strengthen us to follow Jesus. It is God who will bring resurrection where there was only death and decay. It is God who can breathe new life into our mortal bodies. So whatever you are currently feeling hopeless about, health issues, job issues, issues of lack of acceptance of who you are, issues with family, friends or whatever it is, it is God who can breathe life and hope into these dried bones of despair. Give God a try but then remember Ezekiel had to participate, so you are going to have to jump in there and do what God asks you to do.