

Preacher: Pastor Twyla

Scripture: Ezekiel 37:1-14

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, prophecy. 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.'"

Today, we find ourselves confronted with one of Ezekiel's visions. We know little about Ezekiel's personal life. What we do know is that he was an interesting sort of fellow; some might even say weird because of some of the dramatic things he did in obedience to God in order to illustrate a point to the people. His visions were a little wild, as we saw in the story we just heard.

We do know that he was one of thousands of young men taken into exile into Babylon. Before that happened, he was being trained for the priesthood. But then, God got a hold of him and called him to be a prophet. Ezekiel could not ignore the call of God and he became a street preacher for 22 years while the Jews were exiled in Babylon.

Other prophets such as Jeremiah and Isaiah were messengers of warning to God's people of the doom on their horizon. Ezekiel, on the other hand, spoke for God just as the world was falling apart around the Jews. They were suffering national defeat and they were taken from their homeland into a strange land to be ruled by a very authoritarian government. He told them that not even their holy city of Jerusalem would survive. They were a devastated people—lost and without hope.

The Jews may have wondered, why did God let this happen? They thought they were God's chosen people. Perhaps, they had taken God's favor for granted, assuming his protection over them, guaranteed them from all harm. But that's not how it was supposed to work. The covenant they had with God included responsibility on their part. Their role in the covenant was to love, obey and worship God.

By all indications of Ezekiel's message, in the first half of this book, they had failed at that. Ezekiel called the people to repentance. This time of exile was like a period of time-out given to children, and to think about what they had done, and see their need for God and hopefully, choose to return to God. Once again, through the story of the downward cycle of God's chosen people, we are reminded that we have choices to make in our part of our covenant with God, and there are consequences, good or bad, that result from our choices.

One Saturday night a pastor said to himself, "No way I can face that congregation tomorrow. I'm going golfing." So, he phoned his assistant and told him he wasn't feeling well and wouldn't be at church. Then the pastor arose very early Sunday morning and drove out to the local course. Up in heaven, St. Peter nudged God and said, "You see your servant down there, Lord? You see what he's doing?"

God replied, "Mm-hmm." "Well, aren't you going to do anything about him?" God replied, "Don't worry." The truant pastor was the first one to the tee that morning. He teed up his ball, took a swing, and – oh, what a shot! It was the best drive he'd ever hit. As he watched, with disbelief and joy, the ball bounced high on the apron and rolled on the green directly to the flag.

The pastor ran up to the green to find the ball in the cup. It was his very first hole-in-one! He danced around the green all excited. Meanwhile St. Peter tugged at the Lord's sleeve. "God, I thought you were going to take care of this guy! Now he's gone and gotten a hole-in-one." God replied, "I took care of him. Who do you think he's going to tell?"

Is this to say that we bring on ourselves all the bad things that happen to us? No, but with sinfulness comes consequences, maybe not seen immediately, but they will be revealed eventually sometime down the road, and if unforgiven, maybe not in this lifetime, but in the lifetime yet to come. Those consequences will affect others.

I say this thinking about any faithful Jews who found themselves caught in the exile to Babylon. There likely were at least a few faithful to God. And yet they were caught up in the exile suffering as the unfaithful Jews. Sometimes even the faithful can see bad things coming on the horizon and there's nothing they can do about it. They become innocent victims of another's sin.

An example are drivers on a highway, driving fast and weaving in and out of lanes, cutting people off and scaring the bejesus out of law-abiding drivers, and sometimes even causing a wreck, possibly taking someone's life. In their rush to get somewhere, or because they were distracted because they chose to text, check Facebook or surf on their phone, the disrespectful careless driver may be oblivious to the wreck they just caused. This is not God's doing, but the result of bad choices made by others.

Leading up to their exile in Babylon, the Jews chose disobedience to God and took advantage of God's favoritism to them as his chosen people. It led to their downfall and they found themselves in a timeout: 70 years' worth of captivity, plenty of time to reflect on their relationship with God. It's then that feelings of hopelessness set in. Here then, is where Ezekiel shares the vision God gave him to bring hope and restoration to the Jews.

The vision paints a vivid picture. The prophet saw himself in the middle of a valley full of very dry bones. It's not a pretty picture; it's a rather foreboding and depressing vision. The

bones represent the people in exile who were feeling dry, hopeless, and weary, living in a foreign land. The dry bones represented the very much alive people's spiritually dead condition.

The vision goes on to reveal that it is not God's intent to leave them this way. God asks Ezekiel if he believes these bones can live again. I can imagine at this moment, Ezekiel feels frustrated by the people's refusal to listen to him and turn back to God. I can imagine Ezekiel having a hard time envisioning them alive again. But then, Ezekiel responded to God saying, that only God can know this.

Saying this Ezekiel shows us his faith in God. He wasn't merely saying that God could see the future decision the people would make, but he was acknowledging God's sovereignty. He believed that through God, all things are possible. God told Ezekiel to prophesy to the bones, and when he did, the bones were transformed. God then breathed new life into them. What a vision!! A vision of hope for the people of that day—a vision of hope for us today.

This is a message of hope for the church, the body as a whole. Some churches today may seem like a heap of dry bones, spiritually dead with no hope of vitality. The vision of dry bones coming to life, reminds us that God can restore the church, when the church prays for renewal, answers God's call to obedience, and is open to God's Spirit to bring new life.

And, in this season of Lent as we reflect on our own lives and our relationship with God, this vision speaks to us as individuals, too. Quite frankly, the vitality of the church begins with the relationship of the members of the body with God and with each other. The church will not be spiritually alive if its members are spiritually dead.

Each of us has our valleys we must walk through. Some of those dark lifeless valleys are brought on by experiences that are a result of our own bad choices, leaving us, perhaps, in a season of time-out. Other dark valleys may have been inflicted on us by others' thoughtlessness and carelessness. Some of the things that happen to us and rob us of life seem to come without reason. Being a Christian does not mean we are exempt from difficult times in our lives.

Other times, our lives may feel spiritually dry and lifeless because we are not exposing ourselves to the Spirit who breathes life into us. We've chosen instead to live by our calendars, agendas, and desires. Our priority may be to just make it from one day to the next. Our days may be filled with repetitive activities, but lacking substance and nourishment for our souls. We may deprive ourselves of the things that are of God that give us joy and provide meaningful purpose in our lives. It is likely that all Christians will find themselves at one time or another in the ebbs and flows of these struggles.

The words of the prophet, speaking from the vision God gave to him, speaks to us, even today with good news. God brings life from death. God restores the broken! God does not leave us where we are. God is present with us through all of our struggles. We are a people who should cling to hope, the promise of God's love and faithfulness to us, to lead us through challenging, complex, wearisome moments of our life's journey. God tells us through the words of the prophet, that, dry bones are not the final word.

How can we not see this? The greatest testimony we've heard to this end is the death of our Savior due to our sinfulness, and yet he was resurrected. The impossible was made possible. Sin and death do not have the final word!

God does the same in our lives. The Holy Spirit revives us, breathes new life—resurrected life—into us. New life in us may be totally different from what we've known before; but we don't need to fear it.

If we have lost touch with this, maybe we need to let go of something that is draining the life out of us, like the belief that ourselves, and/or our situation is hopeless.

To believe again we may need to pour out the pain in our souls and offer our barren selves in prayer to God. We may need to recommit ourselves to a life of discipline by putting one foot in front of the other in obedience to God (even when we don't feel like it). It may mean clinging even to the thinnest thread of trust and faithfulness, so that our dry bones may be brought to life. We hear in the prayer written by the Psalmist in psalm 130, the words of desperation that any tired, dry, dead soul may be feeling:

¹³⁰ ¹⁻² *Help, God—I've hit rock bottom!
Master, hear my cry for help!
Listen hard! Open your ears!
Listen to my cries for mercy.*

³⁻⁴ *If you, God, kept records on wrongdoings,
who would stand a chance?
As it turns out, forgiveness is your habit,
and that's why you're worshiped.*

⁵⁻⁶ *I pray to God—my life a prayer—
and wait for what he'll say and do.
My life's on the line before God, my Lord,
waiting and watching till morning,
waiting and watching till morning.*

⁷⁻⁸ *O Israel, wait and watch for God—
with God's arrival comes love,
with God's arrival comes generous redemption.
No doubt about it—he'll redeem Israel,
buy back Israel from captivity to sin.*

In this psalm and from the passage from Ezekiel we see the powerful and life-giving truth that God can bring hope to any hopeless situation. He breathes new life in us. He calls us out of our valley of dry bones. But like the Jews who were suffering in captivity in Babylon, we need to turn to God, place our faith in him, trust him, listen to his voice calling to us. Nothing is impossible for God. Do you believe it? Amen.