

**Ezekiel 37:1-14**

**A Time to Grow: Lent 5**

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**Rev. Anna Hubbard**

Ezekiel 37:1-14

*The Valley of Dry Bones*

37 The hand of the Lord came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. 2 He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. 3 He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord God, you know." 4 Then he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. 5 Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath<sup>a</sup> to enter you, and you shall live. 6 I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath<sup>b</sup> in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the Lord."

7 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. 8 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. 9 Then he said to me, "Prophecy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath:<sup>c</sup> Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath,<sup>d</sup> and breathe upon these slain, that they may live." 10 I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

11 Then he 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.' 12 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. 13 And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. 14 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.

Many weeks ago, when Rev. Becker and I were lining out the preaching schedule for Lent and Easter, she asked me to preach this week. She said, and I quote, "It should be fairly easy, it's Ezekiel and the dry bones." I smirked and said, ya, OBVIOUSLY the zombie apocalypse scripture is my favorite one to preach." // I mean who doesn't love God digging up graves and pulling the walking dead from their tombs? It's such a wholesome little story.

At least it was sold as wholesome in my Sunday school class growing up when we sang the spiritual based on this text written by James Weldon Johnson, entitled Dem Bones. If you are over a certain age you might have sung the song too, or some variation. The lyrics include a litany of various bones, their connections, and an address that they listen to Ezekiel's prophecy. If you haven't heard it, it goes:

Toe bone connected to the foot bone

Foot bone connected to the heel bone,

Now hear the word of the Lord.

It continues all the way up until we are connected to the head bone and then goes back down again and then continues...

Dem bones, dem bones gonna walk around

Dem bones, dem bones gonna rise again.

Now hear the word of the Lord...

Isn't it fun what we taught children in the late 80's and early 90's? The details of this text are nothing short of ghoulish. We must reckon with the intensely morbid nature of Ezekiel's vision. The downright chilling vision of a valley full of bones doesn't yet mention the equally unnerving depiction of these disjointed bones coming together, bone by bone, then sinew by sinew, then covered by flesh, then skin, but still somehow *dead* — as if this valley was full of zombies.

Even with all that, there was some truth to my sarcastic response to Kelley. Because it really is one of my favorite Hebrew texts. Stay with me on this one. This story, it is messy. It is kinda scary. And it cautions us that new life may not be easy or neat. The story of Ezekiel is a story of hope. It's a story of restoration, it's a story about a people being so deep in despair and the promise that God is not going to leave them there.

So let's unpack what is happening a little more. The valley where Ezekiel's vision takes place is eerie enough, since it is full of bones, but things get even more spine-tingling when God leads him through and around all of those bones *thoroughly*. These bodies have been dead a long time, therefore; all that is left of them is the bones, and Ezekiel depicts that they are brittle, exposed to the elements, for only God knows how long. After this grisly tour, the God who knows how long these bodies have been exposed asks Ezekiel a unimaginable question: "Can these bones live?". All the evidence points to the contrary, of course: all those bones, dead for so long, so dry, so brittle. And Ezekiel responds to the question, in what I imagine an exasperated and

grossed out way, says, “God, only you could know.” And then we have three sermons that happen within the text.

God doesn't respond to Ezekiel's answer but immediately commands him to prophesy over the bones, ordering them to listen. In this prophecy God promises breath and life, sinews, flesh, and skin, and because the breath is so important, breath and life again.

Ezekiel does what he's told, but the work isn't done after this first sermon to the bones. They are now connected, per the song, but remain zombie-like: a great host of bodies with no breath — and therefore no life. So God tells Ezekiel to prophesy a second time, this time to the breath itself: that it come from the four winds and bring life to these dead bodies. This second sermon does the trick: the breath comes and the bodies come to life and stand up as an exceedingly large and impressive force.

But then, comes a third sermon. This one is God's sermon to the prophet and then to the exiles through the prophet. The exiles themselves, according to God, have been saying that their bones were all dried up. They had lost hope. Babylon had dragged them to exile and fed them a constant diet of bad news, encouraging them to give up, because people without hope don't fight back against their oppressors. Israel's hope was nowhere to be found. They cried to God, “Our bones are dried up. Our hope is lost.” And this is the part of the text I love. The way in which God meets the people where they are – the mastery...you'll see...God takes this figurative speech of the Israelites – “Our bones are dried up” – and God literalizes it in the vision of the dry bones, and THEN – gives it back to the exiles in reply. God knows the exiles are speaking figuratively. And yet God doesn't rebut the exiles in the least; instead, God affirms, repeatedly, that the exiles are indeed in “graves”— but graves that God will open up in order to raise them up and return them back to their homeland. This vision, it's not about being grotesque, it's not about a zombie army, it's not a scare tactic, it is set in motion, as a way for God to connect to the people God loves. The people of God who have complained to God that their bones are dried up and they have no hope. I get it, I am the only one geeking out about how God is using their own words to bring them out of their hopelessness. But hear me out, if Taylor Swift had done this – we would be losing our minds about how genius this approach is. It is next level. And it works, because God meets them where they are. Right in the middle of their perceived and literal hopelessness in their metaphorical graves. God affirms the way they feel. And God promises to put God's own breath on the exiles the same way breath brought life to the bodies in the valley of the dry bones. God promises life and hope to the defeated Israelites. God promises this by shifting metaphors AGAIN with the imagery of God planting Israel in their own land. End scene. UGH!! It's just so so good! And even if you are over the literary mastery that is happening here, I promise, it is so good too for us. It is so good because the takeaways from this text are abundant.

So let's get into that. Hope is tricky. Hope is hard to find when fear is being fed to us from all corners of the world. I wonder what would of happened if God had chosen a different tactic. What if God had said, “Israel! Don't you know that you are the people of the God of hope!? Why are you choosing this hopelessness?” Israel might

have answered, “we’re in exile, in case you haven’t heard, and it is terrible.” I wonder too, how we might answer when posed the same question – , “Well, God, in case you missed it, humanity is ruining the planet, and racism is literally killing people, and school children are being gunned down AT school, and disease and cancer are taking the people we love most, and war and famine exist, and there are siblings for whom we can not help, and there’s not ever enough money or time, and some people have decided that some of us matter more than others of us, and as if all those real problems aren’t enough some of our fellow human beings whom you created by the way, some of them, seem like really terrible people”. Thank goodness God doesn’t tell the exiles simply to stop feeling hopeless. Maybe God realizes that isn’t ever going to work. So instead, God uses their own metaphor to show them that no matter how hopeless things feel, the reality remains that they are a people meant for life. Even on, especially on, the days they feel bone dry.

Walter Brueggemann, has written, “Hope in gospel faith is not just a vague feeling that things will work out, for it is evident that things will not just work out. Rather, hope is the conviction, against a great deal of data, that God is tenacious and persistent in overcoming the deathliness of the world, that God intends joy and peace.”<sup>1</sup> God does what God promises in Ezekiel 37. The exiles do return from Babylon – and in the text God says that God will do that so that, “they will know that I am the Lord.” You see the exiles don’t know they will be returned for sure. Not yet anyway. We know because we know the story. And so, I wonder if that part is for future readers. For you and for me. But I wonder, and I am taking some liberties here, but I wonder if there’s more to it. Maybe it isn’t just about knowing God is God. Maybe it’s so that we will know hope. Maybe it’s so that we will know restoration. Maybe it is so we will know how far the love of God can go.

Life isn’t meant to be lived in the valley on the bones. Yes, we have sadness. Yes, we know death and loss and pain and heartbreak. And through all of those challenging times, the valley of the dry bones reminds us that God’s breath is still filling our lungs and giving us life and hope and purpose. This is God’s story of restoring a whole people. And the work of God is still about restoration. This is why I love this story so much. Because we all need this reminder that even in the valley hope exists. Restoration exists in the desolate places of our lives. I think that’s what we really need when we walk through the doors of this space, is for our hope to be restored. I think that on its best days that’s what the church is called to do, be bearers of hope. That’s what community is all about. Dare I say, that’s what it’s all about. The coffee and the cookies, the greeting, the singing, the sharing, the breaking, the praying, the lighting of candles, it’s a moment in the week where against all odds, we come to be buoyed up. We say it week in and week out, but we come to be reminded that fear and loss, and literal death, is not stronger than love and light and HOPE. We are not meant to be people of despair. We are not created to be dry bones. We are meant to be an active people. Working for justice, feeding the people, caring for a hurting world, filled with the breath of God.

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<sup>1</sup> (Walter Brueggemann, *A Gospel of Hope*, compiled by Richard Floyd (Westminster John Knox Press: 2018), 104–105.)

In the midst of fear, horror, loss, pain, violence, evil, we are called to come out of our graves and in to life. We are called to trust God is at work, creating life in dead places. And when we look around at the valley of bones, at the valley of our despair and brokenness, we are called to believe more in God's ability to bring new life than our easy tendency to trust only in death. Where is the restoration and new life around us? Where are we looking and finding restoration right here and right now?

The other thing I keep coming back to is this – the way in which God brings hope to the people is through the breath of one of their fellow exiles. It is through one of them that God brings hope to those who felt like they were so far gone that no one and nothing could reach them. Hope comes from God, but hope comes from within their own community. It is so so important that we don't miss this. Because the gem of wisdom is that they had what they needed all along. Each other. It brings me back to the Dem bones spiritual.

Toe bone connected to the foot bone. You know for all the despair and challenges that we face in the world, there are so many opportunities for connection too.

Anna is connected to Carol

Carol is connected to Ben

Ben is connected John

Now hear the word of the Lord...

Connected to the.... We are connected to each other.

I heard a story this week,

*The Buddha's cousin Ananda went to him and said,*

"I think friendship, is half of the spiritual path. It's so important to our journey."

*And the Buddha replied, "Ananda, you are incorrect friendship is not half the path, it's the whole thing."* It is so important. Good friends are so important to our growth, healing, and awakening. They influence how we think, how we behave, and how we show up in the world. We are all connected. And when we are connected we share the life that lives in our bones. When humanity gets busy living together, we can do great things. Art and music and 3 point shots and sliced bread and vaccinations against global pandemics. Brand new babies, and lilacs growing against all odds, and gardens that feed out neighbors. When humanity gets busy living, we can feed and care for each other, we can build great things and make life better for everyone.

Let us live lives connected.

Let us remember on our dry days that God is the God of life and HOPE and when one among us forgets that, or can't see that because of all the heartbreak that comes with life, let us be the one among us that breathes life into them again. For this is how we live connected and this is how hope lives on.

Amen.