

Ezekiel 37:1-14 NRSV

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. He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord GOD, you know." Then he said to me, "Prophecy 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 he said to me, "Prophecy 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 he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast

multitude. 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.’ 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.

Dry Bones

Ezekiel was called to prophesy at a time when Israel was deeply divided and had turned their back on God. A people once called to exemplify love for God and one another had devolved into selfishness and greed, into paganism and heresy. The consequences of such sinfulness were close at hand; the people were exiled, Jerusalem and the temple razed to the ground, and the joys and blessing of a life ever more closely aligned with God were unknown.

In this vision, God shows Ezekiel how God sees the people of Israel; spiritually dead. Not spiritually lost, not spiritually sick, but spiritually dead.

Spiritually beyond what any human would hope could be restored. Not one among us, upon stumbling across a skeleton would attempt CPR. That would be foolish. Bones cannot be brought back to life, all that would be left for us to do is to call the authorities that such remains could be properly investigated and buried. This is the sight that Ezekiel is shown; bones.

And not just a few bones, not just a couple skeletons. An entire valley. Ezekiel is being shown devastation and death as far as the eye can see. It would be like looking upon Normandy Beach after D-Day, or Gettysburg after the smoke cleared, or London at the height of the black plague. This was great devastation. Ezekiel was being shown the whole of his people. Can you imagine seeing a vision of America reduced to bones and ashes? Can you imagine how deep that silence would be, or how great the sadness? This is what Ezekiel is shown. His people are spiritually dead.

And even the bones are not simply bones. These are dry bones. They have been picked clean by scavengers and bacteria, weathered by the sun. They are fragile, easily reduced to nothing more than dust. Contrary to popular belief, dry human bones are incredibly fragile. So fragile, in fact, that despite the number of natural history museums you may have visited, it is very likely you've never seen an actual human fossil. In fact, there is a reasonable chance you've never seen a picture of an actual

human fossil. The reason being, such bones are so fragile they are kept in very careful isolation, and what you have seen is likely a plaster cast of the bones. Even the pictures you've seen are probably pictures of the casts. Don't feel too bad, though, even many scientists have never seen the real thing, and are only able to study reproductions, likely leading to many of the squabbles or differences in millimeters.

In the midst of this hopeless scene, God asks Ezekiel if these dry, fragile bones, the spiritually dead remains of a people long lost, could live.

Ezekiel answers, Lord, you know. So much implied in so few words. Lord, you know that humanly this is impossible. But still, God can do anything, even this. The God that could part the red sea and bring creation forth from nothingness could certainly call these dry bones back to life.

And so God does. God pulls the bones together by God's word, clothes them with flesh, and then fills them with breath once more. Israel had wondered and would suffer the consequences of their actions, but all was not lost, it was not hopeless. Someday, the people would return, and God could bring even the spiritually dead back to life.

Sometimes it feels like we're walking through the valley of the dry bones. There is so much misery and hatred in America today. The news is an endless stream of senseless crime after senseless crime, people speak

ill of one another, lying to and about each other, arguing for the sake of arguing. Christianity has become far less common and far less tolerated than it once was. All around us are images of spiritual death. More and more of our loved ones are turning from the church and turning from Christianity in search of other answers. There is nothing more heart wrenching than watching a loved one turn their back on God, and the spiritual decay and devastation that follows. Sometimes those loved ones go so far, we wonder if their dry bones can ever be brought back to life.

It is times like these, like Ezekiel looking at the devastation of the valley, that feel hopeless. Times when the circumstances that face us are out of our control, when our best efforts are not enough, when words fail us.

But God is not a God of hopelessness. God tells Ezekiel to speak God's word over the dry, fragile bones, and suddenly they come together again. Flesh covers them. Suddenly there is hope. Ezekiel speaks God's word once more and what was a Valley of devastation becomes a vast army. God has done the impossible.

Sometimes in the church we can feel like Ezekiel looking around at a wasteland of dry bones. We know there are people who need the gospel message, but we fret over how to reach them. We fret over how to grow our

numbers. So, we try to perform CPR on the skeletons. We try new programs and signs and activities to try and get those dry Boones to pull themselves together and get into the pews where they'd belong, where they can hear God's word and maybe get a little flesh on their bones.

This may be our inclination but that is not what Ezekiel did. Ezekiel did not scoop up the bones and bring them to the synagogue. He did not set the skeletons up at picnics and vacation bible school like some strange Halloween display. Ezekiel was told to speak God's word to the bones. And so he did. Only then did the bones gain flesh and breath. Only then could they have greeted Ezekiel as a brother and entered into community.

We want to scoop up the dry bones we see and bring them to church. We want to prop up the skeletons next to us because we have pews to fill, committees who need members, and the choir can always use a few more voices. But how is that working out for us? I don't see many new faces, skeletons or otherwise, in the audience.

Perhaps Ezekiel can show us a different way. Rather than focusing on events and invitations for the bones, we need to meet them where they are and see where they are really at and able to do. I know of no dry bones that can walk to church on Sunday, but if we first speak God's word, those bones might yet receive new flesh and a new spirit. If we speak God's word

outside of these walls, we might bring the lost back to life, and in turn, they may be able to join us as brothers and sisters.

Dr. J. Wilbur Chapman, who was a famous evangelist, once said that “that the New Testament records tell of forty people, each suffering from the same disease, who were healed by Jesus. Of this number, thirty-four were either brought to Jesus by friends, or He was taken to them. In only six cases out of forty did the sufferers find the way to Jesus without assistance. Of the vast number of people who find their way to Jesus today, most of them reach Him because the friends of Jesus are concerned about the welfare of their souls.”

Friends, skeletons cannot walk. But you can. You can see the dry bones and speak life into them. You can be the friend that is concerned for someone’s soul and even though it might seem impossible or hopeless, you can speak God’s word to them. On their own, it is very unlikely they will find their way to Jesus, let alone Trinity. But if you will speak life to them first, God can restore even the most spiritually dead and lost soul. God can cover those dry bones with flesh. God can breathe into them that they might be able to stand and walk once more, and then, God may well add them to our number. But all of that starts with us, carrying the gospel into

the valley, speaking life to dry bones, and watching the wonders that the God of the impossible can do.

Do not despair at the dry bones before you. God can do all things. But do not expect dry bones to heal themselves. Only God can do such a thing, we have only to take the word to the dry bones, and watch God raise the dead from their graves. And someday, may the valley of dry bones become a great cloud of witness, the brothers and sisters we thought we'd lost, reconciled to God and us once more.

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