

D'em Dry Bones **Ezekiel 37:1-14**

One of the first songs many of us learned as children is "Dem Dry Bones." Teaching us more about human anatomy than Christian theology we sang with delight this traditional African spiritual song:

De toe bone connected to the foot bone.
De foot bone connected to the ankle bone.
De ankle bone connected to the shin bone,
De shin bone connected to the knee bone,
De knee bone connected to the thigh bone,
De thigh bone connected to the hip bone,
De hip bone connected to the back bone,
De neck bone connected to the head bone,
Now hear de Word of de Lord.

Dem bones, dem bones, are gunna walk around;
Dem bones, dem bones, are gunna walk around;
Dem bones, dem bones, are gunna walk around;

A prophet named Ezekiel was associated with the song and we recall something about the valley of dry bones. As children we knew and cared little about the context and meaning behind this powerful vision in the last half of Ezekiel's book that has become part of our Bible.

Who is Ezekiel? What is the meaning of this vision? And what might it mean to the church and God's people today? That's what I want to address in today's sermon. I'd like to give you a little theology with your song that you might carry with you into the valleys of your life and world.

Historical Context

The book of Ezekiel is a long book in the Old Testament, 48 chapters in all. It's filled with fantastic images, metaphors, and visions and is the closest thing to the book of Revelation that we have in the Old Testament. The vision in chapter 37 is the 3rd of 4 visions in Ezekiel's book. It dates to a period of Israel's history known as the Babylonian exile. In 597 B.C. the armies of Babylon forced the surrender of the rebellious city Jerusalem and deported the Judean king and many Judean leaders to Babylon (2 Kings 24:10-16). Ten years later, in 587 B.C. after Jerusalem had rebelled again, the Babylonians utterly destroyed Jerusalem and its temple, creating a pile of stones and charred bodies. They deported a second wave of Judean leaders. Among the first wave of the deported was a 25 year old man named Ezekiel. After being in Babylon for a short period of time Ezekiel was called by God to be a prophet. For those deportees forced to

live in Babylon, the future seemed a black hole into which the people were destined to disappear. They could eat, drink, and marry freely. They could run businesses and go to school. They could worship as they pleased, but there was no temple. There was no city of Jerusalem they could enter. One of the psalms from that era is like an old blues song seeping out of junkie night club in New Orleans. It began: "*By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept, when we remembered Zion.*" Their tormentors demanded them to sing one of those songs of Zion. They replied, "*How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land?*" (Ps 137:4).

Though they tried to go on with their lives, marrying, having children, building homes, and starting life over, they couldn't overcome their despair and depression. They felt defeated and dead. Perhaps their God had been defeated by the Babylonian god. That was the mindset of the ancient world you know. The people wondered if their Lord was truly lord and truly faithful. What were they supposed to do with no king, no land, and no temple? All they had were some songs in their back pocket and a few prophets who spoke of strange visions.

Our Contemporary Context

There are a good number of people who believe Christians in the West are living in exile, or at least on their way to exile. In fact the term "post-Christian" is being used more and more frequently these days. One piece of evidence that we are living in a post-Christian culture comes from the American Religious Identification Survey completed last year. The so-called ARIS. It reports the percentage of self-identified Christians has fallen 10 percentage points since 1990, from 86 to 76 percent. That is a remarkable statistic. There has been a 10 percentage drop in the number of self-identified Christians in America over the last 20 years. If that translates into church attendance and giving, that means the average church should expect a 10 percent drop in attendance and giving over the last twenty years. Therefore if a church is holding its own, it's actually going against the current cultural forces. A separate Pew Forum poll echoed the ARIS finding, reporting that the percentage of people who say they are unaffiliated with any particular faith has doubled in recent years from 8 percent to 16 percent. Meanwhile, the number of people willing to describe themselves as atheist or agnostic has increased about fourfold from 1990 to 2009, from 1 million to about 3.6 million. (That is about double the number of, say, Episcopalians in the United States.)

Another revelation uncovered by the ARIS is that the most religiously unaffiliated region of the country is no longer the Pacific Northwest. For most of our nation's history the Pacific Northwest has been the least churching, least evangelized region of the nation. A dramatic shift has taken place as of 2009. Today the most religiously unaffiliated region of the nation is the Northeast, the New England states. One of the nation's most renowned religious leaders and commentators responded to this revelation saying, "That really hit me hard. The Northwest was never as religious, never as congregationalized, as

the Northeast, which was the foundation, the home base, of American religion. To lose New England struck me as momentous." He offered this assessment, "Clearly, there is a new narrative, a post-Christian narrative that is animating large portions of this society." (April 4, 2009 *Newsweek* magazine).

These statistics confirm some of our own observations, especially from those who have been part of smaller congregations. Church hallways once filled with noisy children are silent. Sunday School classes once used have become dark closets filled with dusty props from the Christmas cantata. Pews overflowing have become empty. The congregation has become more gray-haired, and the young people are talking about spirituality at Starbucks rather than listening to a sermon on Sunday morning. This contraction in the churches of America has created ripples of stress underneath the surface of congregational life. A culprit must be found. It's the domineering pastor. It's a self-indulgent congregation. It's the young people who have abandoned the faith. It's the old people stuck in their ways. It's the media promoting a godless lifestyle. Someone's got to be responsible for this post-mortem, post-Christian, post-modern world that we are seeing as we look into this valley of dry bones.

The Biblical Narrative

Have I depressed you? Are you beginning to despair? Well, that's what we need to feel if we're going to feel what Ezekiel felt, and see what Ezekiel saw, and hear what Ezekiel heard. Look with me at the text and join with me as we walk beside Ezekiel in this valley of dry bones. He is brought by the Spirit of the Lord into the middle of the valley (v 1). Now any time the Spirit of the Lord is bringing somebody somewhere there is something quite intense about to happen. It was the Spirit of the Lord that carried Jesus out to the desert where he was tempted by Satan. The Spirit of the Lord ushers this young prophet into "*the middle of a valley; it was full of bones*" (v 1). The Spirit didn't bring Ezekiel to the edge of the valley so he could gaze at this awful sight. He placed him in the middle of it. It wasn't littered with a few bones here and there. That would have been bad enough. It was full of bones. Think of Gettysburg. Think of the mass graves at Auschwitz and Treblinka. Think of Rwanda. Ezekiel doesn't just stand there petrified like a bone himself. The Spirit led him back and forth among them so he could fully experience the vastness of this valley and the multitude of bones. Again, these aren't fresh bones of recent death. Ezekiel sees "*very dry bones*" as if death had been hovering in the valley for a long time.

It brings to mind the words of Meinhardt Raabe, who died last year at the age of 94. As a 23 year old he was the coroner in my all-time favorite movie the Wizard of Oz. After examining the Wicked Witch of the East he announced to the people of Munchkin Land:

As a coroner, I must aver
I thoroughly examined her.

And she's not only merely dead,
She's really most sincerely dead.

That's what Ezekiel was shown by the Spirit of the Lord. It was a valley of dry bones of people not merely dead, but really most sincerely dead.

Ezekiel is speechless. What can you say? What is there to say in a valley of very dry bones? The Spirit interrupts their trapeze through the valley of dry bones asking, "**Son of man, can these bones live?**" (v 3) It is the pivotal question of the story. Can life come from death? When there is nothing but dry bones, can anything come of it? We learn later (v 11) that this valley of dry bones represents the whole house of Israel. They recognize their dryness and their hope is gone. They recognize they are cut off from God, and therefore cut off from life itself.

That's what many are asking of the church these days. Can the church be revived? Can the church come alive again? Can the church grow again? Can the people be excited about worship and hunger to be in God's sanctuary? Can the church once again become a force for good in the world, a people of confident hope, a body of love and compassion, a missional organism with enough pulsing blood and rushing breath to carry the gospel to the four corners of the world?

Ezekiel doesn't know the answer, or if he does, he's afraid to say one way or another. He answers by saying, "**O Sovereign Lord, you alone know**" (v 3). Only God knows. If there is going to be life in these really most sincerely dead bones, it won't come from human effort. It won't come from some denominational program. It won't come from some different style of music played at the funeral. It won't come through clever preacher who can tell funny stories. It will come from the very breath of God entering into dry bones, not unlike the breath of God that made Adam from the dust of the ground, or the mysterious breath that God breathed into Jesus after he had been in the grave for 3 days. When death comes and bones dry up, only the wind of God's Spirit can bring revival.

So the Spirit of the Lord said to Ezekiel, "**Prophecy to these bones and say to them, 'Dry bones hear the word of the Lord!'**" (v 4). It sounds crazy, I know. A young man in the middle of a valley of very dry bones, preaching to them. Talk about a tough congregation. I'll never-ever complain to God about my congregations again. Not a single living person. Only dry, dead bones.

So Ezekiel begins to preach. The breath of God enters him and proclaims new life to these dry bones. And the toe bones got connected to the feet bones, the feet bones got connected to the leg bones, the leg bones got connected to the thigh bones, and, well, you know what happened. You sang the song. You see the vision. You've heard Ezekiel tell it. They began to rattle. Sinew and flesh appeared. And finally God put his breath into these bones and the valley of dry bones was converted into a valley living, breathing, hoping, wondering, worshipping people. O hear the word of the Lord!

I'm here to prophesy today. The Lord has put breath into my mouth to tell you the church will be revived by the Spirit of God. There are dead churches, and they may

remain dead, churches that have lost their vision, lost their heart, lost their way. But the Spirit of God is moving all around the world, and in the 21st century, the Spirit is most prevalent in the southern Asia, Africa, and South America. Even China, a land dominated by the dryness and deadness of a godless communism for a century is being revived. The Spirit of God is still alive, not only in these other lands. The Spirit of God is breathing life into dry bones in our land and in our midst.

God's breath is blowing in from the four corners of the world to bring life to our church. From India and Mongolia to Nigeria and Canada, God is making flesh alive to the Spirit. God is breathing life through the influx of other Spirit-led Christians to this church from other places. Yates has become a valley of spiritual vitality for people from Chapel Hill and Apex, Hillsborough and Garner. We are no longer a community church, but rather a regional outpost for the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. The bones of our young people are rattling as God puts his hand on them and thrusts them onto platforms where we can hear God's Word proclaimed and God's love shared with others. Children are learning the Bible, singing praises to God, and going out as missionaries and ambassadors for the living Christ. This church is becoming a teaching congregation where young ministers learn how to preach even as the congregation learns how to listen, not to the voice, but to the breath of God's Spirit filling up the voice. God's Spirit has been blown into this church, so listen people, LISTEN, to the rattling of bones and the whirl of God's Spirit driving us to places we know not. All we can know is that the Lord has spoken, and the Lord is doing a mighty thing. He has taken some very dry bones and resurrected a living body of disciples ready to serve Jesus and proclaim his good news.

My friends, I want you to hear the Word of the Lord today. No matter how dead you have felt, no matter how dry your spiritual life has been, no matter what kinds of sins you have committed which have led to judgment in your life, no matter how hopeless you may have felt about your future in God's service, God is not done with you. God can take the driest of bones, the most hopeless situation and resurrect life. God is not done with you. The God who takes dry bones and makes them dance is the same God who put breath into his Son who lie dead in a tomb outside Jerusalem for 3 days. Our God is a God of resurrection and he is still breathing resurrection breath today.

Breathe in,
 receive the Spirit,
 arise and
 serve the living God.