

The Second Baptist Pulpit

“Can These Bones Live?”

Ezekiel 37:1-14

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A young minister not long out of seminary, was serving his first church. As is usually the case, it was a small, rural church—an older congregation. When he preached, the older men immediately drifted off to sleep while their wives kept a smile on their faces, but their eyes told him that they were really finishing the Sunday lunch menu in their heads.

But like most young pastors, he was sure his creativity and enthusiasm could wake them up and get them marching toward

the Kingdom at a livelier pace. So as Pentecost Sunday came around, he hit on a brilliant idea. He enlisted one of the few children in the congregation to be his assistant.

About a half hour before the people began to arrive for church, he sent nine-year old Tommy up the ladder that was permanently fastened to the back wall of the sanctuary, and which led into the space above the ceiling. In the very center of the ceiling, there was a fairly large air vent.

He gave Tommy a white dove that he'd purchased from a pet store. He told Tommy to sit up there above that opening in the ceiling, and listen very intently to the sermon, which for that Pentecost Sunday, naturally, was a sermon about the Holy Spirit.

At a certain point, he would raise his voice, fling up his arms, look upward dramatically and say, *And the Holy Spirit shall descend upon us like a dove.* At that moment, Tommy was supposed to release the white dove through that grate in the ceiling, and let it fly down over the congregation.

That would at least wake up the sleepers and replace the complacent smiles of the faces of the smilers, he thought, if only for a few moments. So when he came to that moment in the sermon, lifted his arms and raised his eyes, and proclaimed in his best Shakespearean stage voice, *And the Holy Spirit shall descend upon us from heaven like a dove,* he lifted his eyes toward heaven and paused dramatically. and nothing happened. No dove.

Oh no, he thought, *Tommy has fallen asleep or he's not paying attention.* So he raised his voice even louder and repeated, *And one of these days the Holy Spirit*

will descend from heaven like a dove.

Pause. Still no dove. *Like a dove, like a dove!*

Just then Tommy put his face down to the hole in the ceiling and yelled down, *There's a cat up here that ate the dove. Do you want me to throw the cat down?*

As hard as we try sometimes to make everything go our way, sometimes the cat eats the dove. And when you consider that the dove represents the Spirit—the Spirit that gives life to our dry bones—, it becomes actually a much more serious issue—that sometimes it seems like the spirit of life itself is swallowed up and gone.

I talked to a guy like that this week. A guy came in to the church on Wednesday from off the street. He wanted to talk to the pastor. I'll be honest with you; I dread these kinds of situations. In my experience it is always, without exception, somebody wanting to tell me a hard luck story and ask for money.

So this guy came in and sat down with me in my office. I kept waiting for him to ask me for money, but he never did. Here are the basics of his story: Kicked out of his house at 14.

Got a baseball scholarship to college but messed around and lost it.

Worked construction all his life. Traveled around the country to follow the work.

Been in a lot of bar fights.

Arrested several times.

Never had a family.

Living with his girlfriend now.

Has a two year old child.

Been out of work since December.

Can't get along with his girlfriend and her teenage daughter but doesn't have anywhere to go and doesn't want to leave the two year old. Doesn't have a relationship with his parents to speak of.

He said, *I'm 38 years old and I've got nothin'. I've got nothin', and I've got nobody. Nobody.*

And then he says, *OK. I've done all the talking. Let me have some advice. Lay it on me. Tell me what to do.*

Can these bones live? he might as well have been asking. *Can these dry, lifeless bones live?* Frankly I don't see it. Looks to me like the cat got the dove, if you know what I mean.

Ezekiel was a Jewish priest in the sixth century B.C. who had lots of visions. And one of the things that Ezekiel saw was a bone-yard.

He's down in a valley full of bones. There are shin bones and arm bones and wish bones and collar bones and skulls covering the valley-- millions of them. And very dry bones. Bleached white by the sun. There is nothing of the power of life left in them at all. And God says to Ezekiel, *Can these bones live?*

Can these bones live? That is the question. That is always the question for Israel and for us.

Can these bones live?

Can a rescue be worked out?

Can the power of life override the power of death?

Is there a future for those in the power of death?

That is the question. Can these dry, lifeless bones live?

That is the question God asks Ezekiel. And it's a good question for Ezekiel at that moment. In fact, it is the burning question for Ezekiel and other Jews at this time in their history.

Not long before Ezekiel had this vision of the valley of dry bones, the nation of Israel had been defeated. The Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar had destroyed Jerusalem and destroyed the temple and exiled all the Jews to Babylon.

We can hardly understand what a national disaster and crisis of faith this was. It's much worse

than if an army came in here and destroyed this church building and exiled us to Arkansas.

They had lost the Promised Land given to them in the time of Joshua. The temple, where they believed the Lord made his name to dwell and where his glory was known, lay in ruins. Ezekiel saw their defeat as the departure of the glory of the Lord from the temple (Ezekiel 10-11).

So the question burning in the hearts and minds of the people was can these bones live? Can a rescue be worked out?

Can the power of life override the power of death?

Of course, these are our questions, too. We are not exiled, but death has claimed a lot of territory in our lives and bodies and minds. Maybe it's cancer, chronic depression, Alzheimers, hopelessness.

Maybe it's not an individual problem but the seeming dry bones of some of our communities or social structures. Just look around.

See the vacant eyes of the desperately poor man sitting on his ramshackle front porch. See children who are already in the process of having the breath of life squeezed out of them. See the mug shot on the TV news.

You read about these horrible murders in Binghamton. What really can take away your hope is not just the killings but to read about the lives of the people involved. Like the article in the *Commercial Appeal* said, when you look more closely at the people involved, you see lives filled with difficulty, dysfunction, criminal activity, and arrests.

One of the men killed had just been dropped off there at that house after getting out of jail. When you put all the records of those involved together, you get assaults, armed robberies, drug possession, prostitution, forgery, burglary and unlawful gun possession.

I was rereading the articles trying to figure out how everyone was related, but I couldn't follow it. One guy was a cousin who was considered a brother by some because he had been raised with them after his own mother's murder. Now, we find out in this morning's paper that they believe it was one of the victim's brother who did it.

I'm not saying all that to dehumanize these people and make it somehow more acceptable what happened. I'm saying it because it is just so depressing to read the stories of all of these lives. It makes you wonder how

anything can ever be done to change things.

A 17-year-old boy from the inner-city on his way to court after committing a violent crime put it this way: *I've been dead since I was 12, so I'm not afraid of dying. I'm just waiting to get kicked into the grave.*

[Jennifer Vogel, 1994]

There are plenty of dry bones all around us. And when I start thinking about my inability to do anything to fix the problem, my hope can really slip away. God asks Ezekiel the question that we are all faced with: Can these bones live?

Ezekiel gives just the right answer to God's question: *O Lord God, you know.* Ezekiel doesn't even try to answer a yes or no.

He doesn't talk about the things he needs to do to bring life to the dry, dead bones. He certainly doesn't tell God what God needs to do.

He just says, *O Lord God, you know.*

Only God knows if these dry bones will live.

Not because God has "inside information." But because only God has the power to make life happen. Only God can speak life into being and breathe life

into death. Lord God, you know if these bones can live. You know because you can give them life.

Ezekiel gave the right answer, and God told Ezekiel to tell those dry bones that God will breathe life into them—that these bones can live.

And Ezekiel spoke those words to the valley of bones.

And the first thing that happened was a sound of rattling and clicking like the tide going out over a million pebbles on a beach as the bones started snapping back together again.

The next thing that happened was a million reassembled skeletons pulling on skin like long underwear.

The last thing that happened was the color coming back to a million pairs of cheeks and the spark to a million pairs of eyes and the breath of life to a million pairs of lungs.

[Frederick Buechner, *Peculiar Treasures*, "Ezekiel"]

Can these bones live? The answer is yes. And if we believe that—that these bones can live—if we believe that, then it makes a difference in what we do today.

The volunteer tutor was asked to visit a nine-year-old in a large city hospital. She took the boy's name and room number and was told by the boy's teacher that they were studying nouns and adverbs in class.

It wasn't until the tutor got to the boy's room that she realized the boy was a patient in the hospital's burn unit. No one had prepared her to find a nine-year-old so horribly burned and in such great pain. She felt she couldn't just turn and leave, so gathered her courage and entered the room.

Hi, I'm the hospital teacher, she stammered. Your teacher asked me to help you with nouns and adverbs. And, clumsily, she launched into the lesson.

The next morning a nurse called the tutor. *What did you do to that boy?* The tutor immediately began a tearful apology, but the nurse interrupted her.

No, no, no. You don't understand. We've been very worried about him. But since you were here, he's fighting back, he's responding to treatment. It's as though he's decided to live.

The boy explained that he had given up hope, until the tutor came. *I figured they wouldn't send a teacher to work on nouns*

and adverbs with a kid who's dying, would they?

["Hope in the active voice," Connections, Solemnity of Christ the King, Nov. 1998.]

Hard as it may sometimes be, we don't let the magnitude of the problems that surround us paralyze us with hopelessness because we know that these bones *can* live.

We work on nouns and adverbs, we take care of our neighbors, we love our family, we tutor one child out of thousands who need it, we visit one sick person at the hospital, we take care of ourselves, we plan for the future because we are not without hope.

All of the good and small acts we do every day are not rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic. They are not wasted activity. You and I are not living on a sinking ship, even though it may sometimes feel that way.

Because these bones can live. Can a rescue be worked out for you? Yes.

Can the power of life override the power of death? Yes.

Is there a future for those in the power of death? Yes.

Because we have a God who when he exhales he breathes out *life*.

He breathes out life into a mass
of cells.
He breathes out life into dry
bones.

He breathes life into bone dry
people.
He breathes life into bone dry
communities.
He breathes life into bone dry
churches.

The breath of God brings color
back into pale cheeks.
The breath of God brings a
spark back into vacant eyes.
The breath of God brings air
back into depleted lungs.

God breathes life.

Some of you have dug holes for
yourselves so deep they feel like
graves. How will you ever get
out? Can you? Listen, nothing
can save you that is possible.
We who are as hopeless as dry
bones require a miracle.
The message of Ezekiel is, *If
God can restore lifeless bones
and buried bodies to life, then
there are absolutely no limits to
God's power.* Ezekiel is here
challenging his fellow exiles to
view their circumstances not
through their own, limited vi-
sion, but through God's eyes.

I remember reading somewhere
about a woman who was devas-
tated by her divorce. She be-
came so despondent that she

even considered suicide. But
finally she left her children with
her mother and took a long trip
out west to think and pray.

One day she found herself sit-
ting, high up a mountain on a
rock
ledge, just staring into space.
Suddenly, as she was praying,
she realized what her eyes were
focused on. She was looking at
a small tree that was growing
out of the crack in a huge boul-
der. She wondered at the ability
of that tree to grow on a rock!

And suddenly she realized, *If
God can make a tree grow out
of a rock, then surely he can
bring something good out of the
dryness of my life!*

And she got up from that place
with hope in her heart.

The God who raised Jesus from
the dead seems not to be out of
business. There is more possi-
ble in our lives when we look to
God and not to ourselves than
we ever imagine.

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