9-6-20 Sermon “Can These Bones Live?”

 On October 13, 2000, a small team of paleontologists led by Paul Sereno of the University of Chicago clambered out of three battered Land Rovers, filled their water bottles, and scattered on foot across the toffee-colored sands of the Ténéré desert in northern Niger, near Gobero.

 The Ténéré, on the southern flank of the Sahara, easily ranks among the most desolate landscapes on earth, and is referred to by the local nomads as “a desert within a desert” - a California-size ocean of sand and rock, where a single massive dune might stretch 100 miles, and the combination of 120° heat and the inexorable winds can wick the water from a human body in less than a day. The harsh conditions, combined with intermittent conflict between the nomads and the Niger government, have kept the region largely unexplored.

 Sereno, a National Geographic Society explorer-in-residence and one of the worlds most prolific dinosaur hunters, had led his first expedition into this desert five years earlier to explore its fossil rich deposits. That initial foray was followed by others, and each time his team emerged from the desert with the remains of exotic species, including Nigersaurus, a 500-toothed plant-eating dinosaur, and Sarcosuchus, and extinct crocodilian the size of a city bus. The 2000 expedition, however, was his most ambitious - three months scouring a 300-mile arc of the Ténéré, ending near a medieval caravan town on the western tip of the desert. Already, his team members had excavated 20 tons of dinosaur bones and other prehistoric animals. Mike Hettwer, a photographer accompanying the team, headed off by himself one day toward a trio of small dunes. He crested the first slope and stared in amazement. The dunes were spilling over with bones. He took a few shots with his digital camera and hurried back to the Land Rovers. “I found some bones,” Hettwer said, when the team had regrouped. “But they're not dinosaurs. They’re human.”

 As it turned out, they had discovered the bones of two distinct peoples who had lived at least 1,000 years apart. And while most ancient gravesites usually held at most 10-12 remains, this site contained hundreds of nearly totally intact skeletons of these two different tribes. The “Lost Tribes of the Green Sahara,” as National Geographic called them in their article about this expedition, lived in the same area of the Sahara, only during their times it wasn't a desert, but rather a lush, and fertile land with lakes and rivers, wildlife and fishing. Analysis of the bones and teeth of these two people's reveal their age, sex, general health, and what their diet consisted of, diseases they suffered from, injuries, and habits, as well as giving clues to their lifestyles, work and living conditions, and even religious practices.

 Reading about this expedition made me wonder, if National Geographic came here for an archaeological expedition, what would an analysis of our spiritual bones reveal about us? Would we show a deficiency of a substantial diet of study, reflection, prayer and a meaningful relationship with God? What would the examination tell us about the richness of our spiritual practices? How sincerely do we long and pray for the gifts of the spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control? Would they find that we live in a lush and fertile “Green Sahara” of faith and faith practices, or a brutal and desolate, life-wicking spiritual desert? What would be our answer if the Lord spoke directly to us and questioned, “Can these bones live?”[[1]](#footnote-2)

 Ezekiel, the author of our Hebrew Bible reading today, was a Jewish priest at the time of the Babylonian exile. He became a priest in 593 BCE, just before the Jewish people were conquered by Babylon in 587 and sent off in exile. Ezekiel too, was sent off in exile, and it was while he was there that he wrote of this vision that he had received from God.

 The valley of dry bones stands in stark contrast to God’s earlier promise of a land flowing with milk and honey that the people of Israel had been given. The Jewish people were brought out of Egypt and put into the promised land, as part of a covenant that God would be their God and they would be God’s people - if they would be faithful. But their lack of faithfulness had resulted in destruction and exile instead of the promised milk and honey. And theirs is a dry bones-hopelessness as an exiled people in Babylon.

 This is a vision, not an historical event, but it speaks to the context of the exile, of the dry, lifeless, dusty, hopelessness that the exiled people would ever return home. And in the vision God speaks to the prophet-priest Ezekiel and asks, “Mortal, can these bones live?” To which Ezekiel wisely replies, “Only you know, God.” Then God calls upon the four winds, from all corners of creation, to blow up on the valley, and suddenly (SING) “the ankle bone’s connected to the leg bone, and the leg bone’s connected to the hip bone…” and you know how the rest of it goes. In the vision, the valley of bones, through the breath, the Spirit of God, is resurrected into a vital people once again. Those in exile eventually return to their homeland, to a new normal.

 It is not difficult to look upon the times in which we are currently living and see a dry, life-wicking, spiritual and communal desert where the bones of who we are called to be as children of God often lie in heaps of brittle brokenness among the shards of shattered trust and hopelessness. Nations, peoples, communities once united around faith, fellowship, shared values, and common dreams are these days divided over power, partisanship, protectionism, and pandemic - siloed in echo chamber-like groups of like-minded partisans no longer seeking the **common** good but striving not only to win whatever the current debate is, but to destroy the other in the process. The bones of the vanquished lie lifeless in the expansive desert of, not a green Sahara, but of a “greed Sahara,” where those who can, or choose to, seek first and foremost to accumulate all they can for themselves regardless of the harm that hoarding might bring to others.

 For those of us in faith communities, at least, we’ve seen this story before. We have record in the various books of the Hebrew Bible of how the people of Israel turned their back on who and how God called them to be and how the consequences of their destructive decision-making led them to be overpowered by a force greater than they had heretofore known, and to be exiled into a land not their own. We can bear witness to the fact that, with repentance, a change in direction, in attitude, in priority, there can be renewed life on the other side of exile - in whatever form that takes. We can even more clearly bear witness to life, death, and resurrection of the One who came to show us most clearly what life in oasis, the land of milk and honey that is the promised kin-dom of God, would look like. We can see, as people of faith, that even as that Friday that we call “Good” looks pretty bad, Sunday is coming! As a resurrection people we have a source of and reason for hope.

 But what of those who don’t share our faith, or can’t find that hope? What of those in our greater community but outside our four walls who are victimized by this relentless onslaught of indecency, inhumanity, racial injustice, and partisan divisiveness, and are left near death - physically, spiritually or otherwise - along the side of life’s road? What are we to do about them? How are we to provide care for them? How are we to be the body of Christ in those places?

 Part of being in the body, of being a disciple of Jesus Christ, is a willingness to be in the world but not of the world, as the apostle Paul wrote. A willingness to be sent out into the bone graveyards - those seen easily and those that lie hidden beneath a veneer of “normalcy” or familiarity - and to prophesy life and hope to the bones we find there. Just as there are spiritually barren places in the world at large, in the macro, they are just as easily found nearby, in the micro, in our community, in our church, in our selves. That is where Christ calls us to go, to be, to make disciples. But before we can *make* disciples, we must first *be* disciples in the world. And to be disciples, means both to be the body as well as to feed the body - physically and spiritually.

 We are fed by and on the Word of God. We are fed by reconnecting, re-ligamenting ourselves with God and with one another through prayer. And we are fed at Christ’s table. When we reach out to others, on campus, in our neighborhoods, in the community spaces, presenting hope rather than hostility, we, like the Samaritan along the road, offer salve to the wounds of a society that is hurting in so many ways. We have people in our church who long for connection with somebody, anybody, in the midst of a pandemic that has isolated them in the cells of their apartments or their homes. Can you breathe life into those valleys? We have young people on campus who have returned to in-person classes, not because they felt safe doing so, but because they had no other choice. Rather than cross to the other side, are there ways you, O Mortal, would come alongside them, in prayer, in fellowship, in support, bringing life and hope to them? We have people in the community who have been served by our Laundry or other outreach ministries, or who have been cared for by ministries we support, like WARM or Promise House - can you, as a disciple of Jesus Christ in this time and this place, be the body of Christ in ways that will demonstrate the love and hope we have in Jesus Christ by taking that love out into our community?

 Our God, the creator God, called upon the four winds, from all corners of the world, for all the peoples of the world, and breathed life into us. The same breath that was breathed into humans in the Creation poem in Genesis is breathed into the dry and dusty bones that are envisioned by Ezekiel, is breathed into the crucified Jesus, and is breathed into our mortal bodies as well. And in the wind God asks us as God asked Ezekiel, “Mortal, can these bones live?”

Oh God, only you know. Amen.

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What dry bones, and dry times, are represented in our own spiritual lives?

What can we learn from the lonely and parched. So of our spiritual journeys?

Where do we need to trust God to know what we need in our lives, and invite God to call the reanimating wins into our spirits and our faith that we might be filled with hope for an end to the ways in which we are in exile?

What can your spiritually dry bones teach you? Who do we need to preach to our bones? What words do we need to hear today? How do we open our dry bones up to receive the resurrecting breath of God?

From a different sermon – Ezekiel has a vision of a valley of dry bones – dry bones represent death do they not? Maybe even dead faith. There is no life, there is no flash and blood, no muscles, no organs, no heart or brain, only dry, brittle bones. There is nothing about the bones to identify who's bones they might be – are they Jewish bones, are they Moabite bones, Phrygian bones, Eli my bones, Madeon bones. Are they male bones, female bones, Rich Barnes, Poor bones, Gabe bones, Street bones, Methodist bones, Baptist bones? We don't know and it doesn't matter because the breath of God pours out over all of them without regard to ethnicity, without regard to economic status, without regard to sexual orientation, denominational or political affiliation, or anything else. God breathe life back into his bones that once were dead-they once were lost but now they're found.

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Look at “Lost Tribes of Green Sahara” referenced in FOTW

compare valley of dry bones to our current time: politics, racism, pandemic that exile us from what seems like reality, or the kindom of God

dry bones represent dryness in our spiritual life, communal life,

God breathes in from the 4 corners, from all places and and all peoples to restore life and breath to the community

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Ezekiel 37:1-1- (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. **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, “Prophesy 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 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 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, “Prophesy 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.” **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.”

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 **Sermon Title | Tidying Up**

**Scripture** | Ezekiel 37:1-10 New Revised Standard Version (dry bones come to life)

**Desired Outcome** | Congregants will recognize how God can use them to help breathe new life into places that may appear lifeless.

**Reflection Question** | How is God working through you to breathe new life into a valley of dry bones in our community?

**Worship Promo for Week 2 in Worship Folder**

Part of being willing to invite people into the kingdom of God is being willing to go into new places to do that. This includes going into the empty, forgotten spaces that – like the valley of the dry bones Ezekiel describes – appear lifeless. What will it take for God’s presence to be recognized moving among the dry bones?

**Sermon Building Key Points**

• All life is gone from the valley, but the spirit is still present.

• In our own ways, each of us, each of our churches and each of our communities is a gathering of dry bones, which God has the power to restore.

• Some of us have been valleys of dry bones into which God’s Spirit has breathed new life.

• Sometimes the Holy Spirit invites us to view old places from a new perspective.

• God didn’t tell Ezekiel to watch; **(or form a committee, or hire a staff person to do it)** God invited him to participate.

• Places that are alive to the world are not necessarily alive for God; places that are dead to the world are not dead to God.

• Church should be more verb than a noun, and Christ’s church can happen anywhere at any time.

* Where is the wilderness? Where are the valleys of dry bones hidden in our community? What IS our community, how many concentric circles make up our community? Church/congregation - campus - Uptown - Westerville - farther?

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**Commentary on Ezekiel 37:1-14**

April 6, 2014 workingpreacher.org

Accessed 8-27-20

[**Margaret Odell**](http://www.workingpreacher.org/profile/default.aspx?uid=2-odell_margaret), Professor of Religion, St. Olaf College, Northfield, MN

In this last Sunday before Holy Week, two texts promise resurrection.

In Ezekiel, dry bones are knit back together and infused with life-giving breath, while in John, Lazarus is brought back to life after four days in the tomb.  **resurrection life is [not] necessarily pretty. Resurrection is not new life, the perfect promise of a newborn baby, but renewed life, life forged from death; even the risen Jesus still bore his scars.**

For congregations who have tended to the dying and cared for the grieving over the past year, these texts do not glibly wash over the reality of suffering and death with the bright pastels of Easter. Nor should they; we are still in Lent, after all. Yet **with all its brutal honesty, Ezekiel’s vision challenges us to see that the problem is not death but the fear of it, while the solution -- God’s ever-present gift of life -- is as near to us as breathing.**

Under the hand of God, Ezekiel is carried in the spirit to a valley filled with a great many dry bones. Although it is not named, its identification as “the” valley suggests a particular place; other clues suggest a battlefield. As such, it evokes ancient Near Eastern curses threatening treaty violators not only with wholesale destruction but also with leaving the slain unburied for carrion prey to devour.

**In this one grim scene, then, we are reminded of all that has transpired since Ezekiel was first summoned to speak to the rebellious house of Israel. From the time Ezekiel first began to speak in 592 BCE, the people’s long history of rebellion against God and now also against Nebuchadnezar has sealed their fate. Destruction was inevitable, and by 586 BCE Jerusalem lay in ruins. Whether we are to think of this battlefield as Nebuchadnezzar’s doing or God’s, we are to remember a broken covenant and unspeakable loss.**

**We may also be asked to remember Ezekiel’s commission as a prophet to sound the warning in the hope that some might hear, repent, and live. The sheer number of bones suggests prophetic failure, and God’s question to Ezekiel can only remind us of that grim fact. “Mortal, can these bones live?” At the end of his own imagining, Ezekiel can only leave it up to God: “Oh Lord, you alone know.”**

God responds by commanding Ezekiel to prophesy. Although God addresses Ezekiel, the message addresses the bones directly, promising to bring breath into them and clothe them with flesh. The message makes it clear that any new life is God’s doing (verses 4-6), and it ends in a familiar Ezekielian refrain: “and then you will know that I am the Lord.”

**As Ezekiel prophesies, the bones come together with a great rattling and quaking as sinew, flesh, and skin come on to the bones. But there is still no breath in them, so God commands Ezekiel to prophesy again, this time to the “breath,” or “wind” (Hebrew, r*uach)*. Ezekiel does as commanded, and as breath enters into the slain, they live and stand as a great multitude.**

**The image is not entirely heartening. In other prophetic images of restoration, there is dancing and rejoicing; here, the dry bones are indeed alive, standing on their feet. But they’re not doing much more than that. What are they doing just standing there?**

**The ambiguity of the image is only heightened by God’s explanation to Ezekiel in verses 11-14. God explains to Ezekiel that the dry bones represent the whole house of Israel. Their complaint, “Our bones are dried up, our hope is lost, we are clean cut off,” gives further clue to their identity and concerns. These are not the ones who were slain but those who have survived in exile. Parallels with similar expressions in the Psalms suggest they feel themselves cut off from God’s presence -- perhaps because they perceive the covenant to have been severed, certainly because absence from the Jerusalem Temple closes off any possibility of seeking God. For the exiles, being cut off from God means they are as good as dead.**1

**If the dry bones represent the living exiles, then, it turns out that the entire vision is concerned, not with the reality of death, but with despair.** The exiles were the survivors, yet they have dug their graves with their fear of God’s absence. To this hopelessness Ezekiel offers a startlingly simple metaphor of divine presence, the ready availability of breath. **In just fourteen verses, the word *ruach* occurs nine times, and while it is variously translated as “breath” (verses 5, 6, 8, 10), “wind” (verse 9) and God’s own spirit (14), we would lose the metaphorical force of this usage if we neatly differentiated between the meanings. Whether it appears in one instance as breath or in another as wind, it is all the same life giving force. And it is all from God.**

**And it is in this sense that breathing becomes a metaphor for divine presence. Despite the exiles’ fear of being cut off from God, God is as near to them as their own breath. Ezekiel’s vision does nothing to alleviate them of their present difficult circumstances, though it does promise them a future in their own land.**

Though they remain in exile, still coping with the death of loved ones, still mourning the loss of familiar ways to find and meet God, they are reassured of God’s presence. The standing multitude of dry bones brought back to life now acquires a somewhat different connotation. Because God is present, they can breathe. And stand ready for the future, looking forward in hope.

**Notes:**

1 Saul M. Olyan, *“‘We Are Utterly Cut off’: Some Possible Nuances of ngzrnu lnu in Ezek 37:11*,” *CBQ* 65 (2003): 43-50.

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**Commentary on Ezekiel 37:1-14**

April 10, 2011

Accessed August 27, 2020, workingpreacher.org

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Our culture seems obsessed with death imagery.

From crime investigation television shows like *CSI* and the aptly named *Bones*, to the revitalization of classic works of literature into ghoulish parodies such as *Pride and Prejudice with Zombies*, figures of death crowd the popular cultural landscape. If we turn our attention away from mere entertainment to media coverage of disease, poverty, natural disaster, and war, the obsession only amplifies.

Perhaps death and our fascination with it is simply a result of the human condition, as Ecclesiastes suggests: "Moreover, the hearts of all are full of evil; madness is in their hearts while they live, and after that they go to the dead" (Ecclesiastes 9:3). Or perhaps we are pursuing the ancient quest to conquer death chronicled in stories as ancient as Gilgamesh and as new as *Battlestar Galactica*.

The book of Ezekiel tells some of the most macabre tales in the Bible. Yet, when people mention the prophet Ezekiel these days, we may only think of Samuel L. Jackson wildly paraphrasing the book in Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* (often before a cold-blooded killing) or television documentaries "reporting" references to aliens in the Bible. In Christian circles, however, the name Ezekiel almost universally invokes the story of a valley filled with dry bones that is the reading for the fifth Sunday in Lent (Ezekiel 37:1-14).

It is no wonder that the Christian tradition often reduces the book of Ezekiel to this one magnificent text, given the strange, violent, incomprehensible, and even offensive nature of much of the book (see Ezekiel 16 and 23). It is much more palatable to reach for the hope of resurrection that one finds in Ezekiel 37--or perhaps the lush picture of new creation in Ezekiel 47--than to dare confront some of the book's darker imagery. Ezekiel's audience members misunderstood his melodramatic ranting as much as we do. In an exasperated response to God, the prophet himself laments: "Ah, Lord GOD! They say of me: He is just a riddlemonger" (Ezekiel 21:5 JPS).

God actually begins Ezekiel 37 by presenting a riddle to the prophet: "Mortal, can these bones live?" (Ezekiel 37:3) Surveying the valley filled with dried, brittle bones, the prophet meekly responds with an exasperated, "O Lord GOD, only You know." We cannot fully comprehend the magnificent hope in the latter verses of this passage without some attention to why Ezekiel's response is so resigned. **Before we can watch the wind swirl the bones back together and marvel at the newly formed humans breathing the breath of life again, we have to ask a few questions. Why is the valley full of bones? What caused the visions of death that the community faced? What has brought Ezekiel to the point of near speechlessness and despair?**

**Because we so often do not read the rest of the book leading up to this grand scene, we have a myopic view of the prophet's own desperation and the plight of the community to which this story attempts to give hope. We forget that Ezekiel himself was taken into exile in 597 BCE, that he heard reports of his religious institution being corrupted without the proper oversight of the priesthood, and that his status had been reduced from a prominent position as a future priest in Jerusalem to that of a temple-less priest in exile.  We forget the death of his wife and God's command for him not to mourn her as an example for the exilic community not to mourn the loss of the Temple (24:16-24).**

**More importantly, we forget the historical trauma that accompanied this exile. We forget that the Babylonians tortured the inhabitants of Jerusalem with siege warfare that lasted almost two years, leading to famine, disease, and despair (2 Kings 25:3). We forget how they destroyed the city of Jerusalem, razed the temple to the ground, killed many of its inhabitants, and forced the rest to migrate to Babylon. Over and over again, in the texts we refuse to read from the book of Ezekiel, the prophet offers imagery that testifies to and metaphorically represents the multiple traumas that the community faced under the realities of ancient Near Eastern warfare.**

While many of us read Ezekiel 37 as a beautiful passage, it is also horrifying. It is horrifying because it calls the reader to remember, confront, and testify to the devastating events that led to the valley filled with dry bones in the first place. Its beauty, however, manifests itself with the possibility that even in this landscape full of death, a hope for renewed life remains. Ezekiel prophesies to the bones that soon reanimate, with newly formed sinews knitting the bones together as living flesh and skin envelop them (verse 8). **In a scene that recalls the breath of God entering the first human in Genesis 2, the prophet then commands the four winds and the same breath of God enters the reanimated bodies that live once more (verse 10).**

**The miracle of this vision does not simply lie in its theatricality. The true miracle is that it occurs after the community has faced such devastating loss. Yet, the familiarity of this text can tempt preachers and teachers to reduce the miraculous to cliché. We can often turn it into a promise for new life on individual and communal levels without taking seriously the situations and circumstances that have lead to the initial death.** As is the temptation in every Lenten season, we might look forward so fervently to the reanimation of the bones that we rush forward to the glory of resurrection Sunday without considering the trauma of the preceding week. While celebrating the victory over death, we refuse to evaluate the systems, patterns, and consequences of our walk through the valley of its shadow.

If we are to teach and preach this text responsibly, we must pay attention to the boundary between life and death. We must at once recognize and bear witness to the despair of the world around us while also inspiring hope for a seemingly impossible future. **Our task, like Ezekiel's, is not an easy one. But if we are able to shed our cynicism and despair, if we are willing to discern and testify to the death that surrounds our communities, and if we are prepared to obey the charge to command the spirit of God to renew them, perhaps the Church can and will fulfill its role to inspire new life in the darkest valleys.**

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**Commentary on Ezekiel 37:1-14**

March 9, 2008 [workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org)

Accessed 8-27-20

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The "valley of dry bones" is almost certainly the most beloved and well known of Ezekiel's visions.

The vividness of its imagery, the wonder of its unfolding narrative, and visceral appeal of its symbolism endow it with a sort of plug-and-play appeal--even an uninitiated reader can engage with this wonderful story. And yet the story becomes even more powerful when the reader learns something about its historical context, literary background, and theological symbolism.

*Historical context*

**This vision dates to the period of Israel's history known as the Babylonian Exile. In 597 BCE, the armies of Babylon forced the capitulation 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 587/6 BCE, after Jerusalem had rebelled again, the Babylonians razed Jerusalem and its temple and deported a second wave of Judean leaders. Among the first wave of the deported was the young Ezekiel, whom God later called in Babylon to the office of prophet. For those deportees forced to live in Babylon, the future seemed a black hole into which the people were destined to disappear. A century-and-a-half previously, many citizens of Judah's sister kingdom Israel had been similarly deported, had lost their identity, and had faded into the mists of history--the so-called lost tribes of Israel. The exile was more than just a crisis of physical suffering and communal identity. It also necessitated a crisis of faith. The key symbols of Judean faith--Jerusalem, its temple, its people, and the Davidic monarchy--had been destroyed (cf Psalms 89 and 137). According to the theological rationality of the ancient world, many exiled Judeans assumed that their deity had been defeated by a stronger deity from Babylon (cf. Ps 42:3, 10; 79:10; 115:2). The people wondered if the Lord was truly lord and truly faithful.**

*Literary background*

Behind the vision in Ezekiel 37 are two literary forms--the communal **lament psalm** and the prophetic message of deliverance. In communal laments, the people poured out their pain in fervent cries for deliverance. Toward the end of the oracle **in Ezekiel 37:1-14, we hear the words of lament of the deported people: "Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely" (v. 11). One finds similar language in the lament psalms. "My strength fails because of my misery, and *my bones* waste away" (Ps 31:10). "*My bones* are shaking with terror" (6:2). "*My bones* burn like a furnace" (102:3). The reference to "bones" here is an idiomatic way of referring to one's deepest self, or, in the case of "our bones," a way for the community to refer to its most essential self (thus also when Adam, in search of a partner finally finds Eve, he cries "This at last is bone of my bones" [Gen 2:23]). What we learn from this is that Ezekiel's vision of the valley of dry bones is a *poetic and prophetic response* to the situation of God's people--to their sense of hopelessness, to their situation of being cut off from their land, their temple, and--they think!--from their God. The people use a common idiom of their time to express their helplessness and hopelessness. They say, "Our bones are dried up." So Ezekiel shows them a vision of exactly that: dry bones.** The second literary genre that helps one understand Ezekiel's vision is the prophetic message of deliverance (also called the oracle of salvation). As is well known, the prophets were messenger sent from God bearing messages. At times the prophets were sent with messages of judgment, calls to repentance, and admonitions to obedience. At other times--and this is the case in Ezekiel 37--the prophets were sent with good news. The summary of Ezekiel's good news is found in vv 12-14, which culminates with these words: "I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil." Ezekiel's message is the promise that God's spirit will reach out and bring the people back from exile.

*Theological symbolism*

A third element in the story that is helpful is the multidimensional meaning of the Hebrew xwr (*ruach*). This word can mean "spirit" (as in God's spirit), "wind," and "breath." In this vision, the prophet plays on all three meanings as part of his brilliant strategy to make God's promise of return from exile ring in the ears of the deportees. In v. 1, Ezekiel reports that the Lord's spirit (xwr) showed him a vision of an entire valley filled with dry bones. As already noted, this vision is an echo of the people's lament. (I have young children, so when I think of this vision, I see the scene in Disney's *The Lion King* of the elephant graveyard.) The question is, "Can these bones live?" The key to the unfolding story, of course, is that in order to live, they need not only flesh, sinew, and skin. . . but also breath: "I will. . . put breath (xwr) in you, and you shall live" (v. 6). Then, in the vision, sinew, flesh, and skin cover the bones, but there is no breath (xwr) in them (v. 8). So, Ezekiel prophesies to the breath (xwr), "Come from the four winds (xwr), O Breath (xwr), and breathe upon these slain, that they may live" (v. 9). And "the breath (xwr) came into them, and they lived" (v. 10). As already noted, **in Ezekiel's explanation of the vision, he summarizes the point: "I will put my spirit (xwr) with you, and you shall live" v. 14). The prophet's insistent use of repetition drums the point of the message into our heads: God's spirit is the key. With God's spirit, anything is possible. Without it, existence is just flesh and blood. But with God's spirit, there is life--and what Jesus called fullness of life. And there is no place on earth, no when in time, and no what in sin or situation, that can keep God's Spirit away from God's people (see Romans 8:31-38).**

*A final word about preaching this text*

The text not only gives the preacher a powerful gospel to proclaim, it also confers a freedom of proclamation on the preacher. **Most preachers will explain the meaning of the text and proclaim it anew to congregations today. And that is good and neat. But the preacher also has as much freedom as Ezekiel had to enter into a sermon as evangelical performance. Is there a way for the preacher not just to explain the text, but to do more? As Ezekiel drew on the metaphor of the lamenting bones of the people and wrought from that image the vision of the valley of dry bones, can the preacher enter into the lives of the people and cast a vision for them of God's Spirit at work in their lives?**

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1. Amos, Katherine, *Feasting On The Word, Year A, Volume 2,* “Commentary on Ezekiel 37:1-14,” Westminster John Knox Press, 2010, Louisville, KY, 124, 126. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)