

DRY BONES
Ezekiel 37:1–14
Dean Feldmeyer — 03.22.26

Years ago, Sears ran a television ad campaign with commercials that began, “This Saturday, when you go to Sears...” That’s how big Sears was. It was simply assumed that everyone went to Sears every Saturday—and the assumption was nearly correct. They sold just about everything a person could want or need: clothing, candy, automotive tools, carpets, vacuum cleaners. Their Craftsman tools and Kenmore appliances set the industry standard for quality and durability. If you needed something—anything—my aunt would say, “Just go to Sears and buy one.”

People went to Sears on Saturdays. The aisles were crowded, and business was brisk. And if you couldn’t find what you wanted in the store, you could turn to the three-inch-thick catalog and find it there.

That was then. This is now.

RETAIL DRY BONES

The Craftsman brand has been sold. At the height of their success, there were about 3,000 Sears stores and as many Kmart stores in the United States. Today there are eight Sears stores and nine Kmart stores, and Sears Holdings says those stores will likely close by the end of the year.

Several years ago, USA Today ran an exposé asking how this could possibly happen. Sears CEO Eddie Lampert was getting rich while the company failed and their stockholders went broke.

Sears isn’t going down alone.

- J.C. Penney has closed 138 locations—14 percent of its stores—and bought out 6,000 employees.
- Yum Brands announced last week that they are closing all of their restaurants as of June.
- Macy’s has closed more than 128 stores and may be up for sale.
- MC Sports has closed 68 stores and filed for bankruptcy, along with Sports Authority, Golfsmith, and Sport Chalet.
- Outdoor giant Gander Mountain has filed for Chapter 11 and closed more than 35 stores.
- Payless, the bargain shoe retailer, has closed 1,000 stores.
- The Limited has closed 300.
- Radio Shack is gone.

There are more. I could go on, but why beat this depressing horse any further?

Of course, there are many reasons companies fail. Some are poorly managed. Others lose their way and stop providing what brought customers in—low prices, good service, reliability. Others fail to keep up with a changing culture. When bookstores were closing left and right,

Barnes & Noble survived by adapting and offering a smaller, cheaper version of Amazon's Kindle.

Still others are simply outpaced by bigger, faster, cheaper competitors.

Whatever the reason, when the stores fail, the malls and shopping centers fail as well. Hardly a town in America has escaped the sight of malls closing, strip centers emptying, and half-built shopping complexes abandoned. The collapse follows a predictable chain reaction: the company fails, the stores close, the mall dies, and the surrounding businesses—restaurants, hotels, and gas stations—go down with it.

Suddenly, what was once a thriving retail district becomes a wasteland of empty buildings whose owners hope desperately to repurpose them before the wrecking ball arrives. And let's be honest: we've seen this before. These empty storefronts feel hopeless.

But before we carve the tombstone for these and other seemingly hopeless situations, let's look at what Scripture has to say about hope, hopelessness, and how the people of God approach both.

THE BIBLE ON HOPE AND HOPELESSNESS

This week's lectionary readings confront hopelessness head-on.

Ezekiel 37:1-14

Ezekiel was a prophet who brought the word of the Lord to the children of Israel while they lived in exile in Babylon between 586 and 500 BCE. In today's reading, the prophet has a vision in which God leads him to a valley filled with dry bones.

The passage doesn't say why the bones are there or even if they are human, but scholars agree it's safe to assume they are. I imagine a great battle once raged in that valley, and the carnage was so overwhelming that the survivors simply walked away, leaving the bodies to the scavengers and the sun.

Or perhaps it was the site of a great catastrophe—an earthquake, a fire, a flood—that killed so many people they could not all be buried. Or maybe it was a plague that rained silent death on the valley, and though the survivors longed to bury their dead, they dared not return.

Whatever the cause, the bodies were left, and eventually the bones were left to bleach in the sun. Ezekiel notes that they have been there a very long time—long enough to be completely dry. They are symbols of hopelessness.

“Mortal,” God asks Ezekiel as the prophet walks among the bones, “can these bones live?”

Ezekiel hesitates. He likely wants to say, “No, of course not. They're dead. They've been dead for ages. There's no life left in them.” But he's speaking to God, and God is known for trick questions. So, he answers carefully:

“O Lord God, you know.”

What follows is a series of proclamations God commands Ezekiel to make to this long-dead congregation. Through these mini sermons, God makes it clear that these hopelessly dead bones can indeed live again—but not by human effort. Only God can make this happen, and only in God’s time and God’s way.

Then God explains that the vision is a metaphor for what God intends to do for the people of Israel, who are exiled in Babylon and have given up hope. God will breathe life back into the nation. They will live and walk again—but by God’s power, not their own.

John 11:1-45

The gospel writer we call John retells the familiar story of the raising of Lazarus. Lazarus has been in the tomb four days when Jesus arrives. Three days was the customary waiting period to confirm death; Lazarus has passed that threshold. And there is the stench, the unmistakable sign that the body has begun to decompose.

Like the dry bones in the valley, Lazarus appears to be a hopeless case.

But Jesus calls out, “Lazarus, come out!” And there he stands in the doorway of the tomb, wrapped in burial cloths like a mummy in an old movie. His sisters remove the wrappings, and in the aftermath, we are told that many of the Jews who had come to comfort Mary saw what Jesus did and believed in him.

Romans 8:6-11

In his letter to the Christians in Rome, Paul addresses a concern that still troubles people of faith today.

Our culture tells us—and we often believe—that if we can satisfy every physical want, then we will finally be free to tend to our spiritual needs. If I could just have that sleek little convertible... If I could just buy that designer suit... If I could just get the money together for that house... then I’d be happy. Then I could concentrate on my spiritual life and get right with God.

Paul turns that idea upside down.

He says we should tend to our spiritual lives first. Get right with God. Let God’s Spirit—God’s breath—fill you, guide you, heal you, deliver you. Then you will find that your physical needs are met more easily and more fully.

Get your spiritual life in order, Paul says, and the rest will follow.

CAN THESE BONES LIVE?

So—what do you think?

Will these empty storefronts, these closed factories, these shuttered restaurants, these crumbling churches, these interrupted lives and broken dreams ever live again? Will they ever come alive again?

“O Lord God, you know.”

These are not merely theological or rhetorical questions.

In 2007, Clinton County had the lowest unemployment rate in Ohio—just under 4%. Then two things happened. First, the sub-prime mortgage crisis broke, and the nation fell into a deep recession. Then, right here in our own county, the international freight carrier DHL announced the closure of its break-bulk terminal in Wilmington. Within a year, 6,000 jobs in our county were gone, and another 4,000 disappeared in the surrounding counties. Overnight, our unemployment rate became the highest in the state—nearly 35%.

The dominoes began to fall almost immediately. Over the next two years, stores, restaurants, dry cleaners, and even churches closed as families left to find work elsewhere. Home sales collapsed. New construction stopped. People walked away from mortgages and leases, leaving empty houses scattered across the county.

“Mortal, can these bones live?”

We heard that question echoing in our hearts—if not aloud—as we gathered in task forces and work groups, trying to soften the blow of the disaster. We gathered on the courthouse lawn and in our churches to sing hymns, to pray, and to bear witness to our faith in God and in one another.

Eventually the losses slowed, and things even began to turn around.

Today, nineteen years later, Clinton County is in a far better place. The exodus eased the pressure. New home construction has resumed, even as some abandoned houses still sit empty, collecting dust and cobwebs. And now, at long last, “Help Wanted” signs are appearing again in storefront windows. Unemployment is at 3.8%

Some of this renewal is the result of long hours and hard work by community leaders and citizens. But we also know that much of it is not the result of human effort alone. It is the work of the One who showed Ezekiel a valley of dry bones rising to life. It is the work of the One whose hand lifted Lazarus from his tomb when Jesus called, “Lazarus, come out!”

We have remembered, as a community, that our lives are not defined by what we own or by how many reserved parking spaces we have. We are not made authentic by the depth of our checking accounts or by any of the things that make us feel secure. No—we are made

authentically human, authentically the people of God, by our relationships with God and with one another.

TRANSFORMED, RENEWED, RESTORED

Few contemporary thinkers have expressed this truth more beautifully than psychiatrist and author Viktor Frankl. He survived Auschwitz—one of the most hopeless places the world has ever known.

His book *Man's Search for Meaning* is both memoir and reflection. He writes about life in the extermination camps and about how those who survived managed to do so. Two passages speak powerfully to our reflection today.

“We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way.”

And this:

“For the first time in my life I saw the truth as it is set into song by so many poets, proclaimed as the final wisdom by so many thinkers. The truth—that Love is the ultimate and highest goal to which man can aspire. Then I grasped the meaning of the greatest secret that human poetry and human thought and belief have to impart: The salvation of man is through love and in love.”

That, brothers and sisters, is God’s transforming and redeeming power working through us. It is the power that — as Paul Tillich says — transforms everything. It is the power that changes, informs, renews, and energizes our lives and pronounces them good.

It is the Love of God for us, our love for God, and our love for one another.

May God redeem and restore us through that Love more and more each day.

Amen