

“CPR Training in the Valley of Dry Bones”

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“WHAT WE NEED IS HERE”

*Geese appear high over us,
pass, and the sky closes.
Abandon, as in love or sleep,
holds them to their way,
clear in the ancient faith:
what we need is here.
And we pray, not for new earth or heaven,
but to be quiet in heart, and in eye, clear.
What we need is here.
~Wendell Berry~*

EZEKIEL 37:1-14

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. ²He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. ³He said to me, “Mortal, can these bones live?” I answered, “O Lord God, you know.” ⁴Then he said to me, “Prophesy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. ⁵Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. ⁶I 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.” ⁷So 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. ⁸I 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. ⁹Then 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.” ¹⁰I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude. ¹¹Then 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.’ ¹²Therefore prophesy [to the House of Israel], 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. ¹³And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. ¹⁴I 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.

ROMANS 8:26-28

²⁶Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. ²⁷And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. ²⁸We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to God's purpose.

“The Word of the Lord ~ Thanks be to God”

(INTRO)

We are in the season of Pentecost, and Pentecost is indeed a season of hope. This Ezekiel text is not one that we would at first glance assign “hope” as its descriptor. Interesting word – hope. In his discourse on optimism and hope, Miroslav Volf, theologian at Yale asserts...“Optimism is based on the possibilities of things as they have come to be – things that are extrapolative; hope is based on the possibilities of God irrespective of how things are. Hope can spring up even in the valley of the shadow of death; indeed, it is there that it becomes truly manifest. ...Hope THRIVES even in situations, which, for extrapolative cause and effect thinking, can elicit only utter hopelessness. Why? Because hope is based on God's coming into the darkness to dispel it with divine light.”¹ And God indeed entered the people of Israel's darkness, their dark night of the soul, their space which appeared devoid of God's presence and God's love. Again – though not at first glance, hope was in the air. Hope was on the scene when God asked the prophet Ezekiel that peculiar question. “Mortal, can these bones live?”

In our text today, the Children of Israel are experiencing a profound emptiness. They have been through a tragic time. For they are in exile in Babylon. The Babylonian army has decimated their army and many of their people. Their homeland Jerusalem has been reduced to rubble, the temple included. So here they are in Babylonian Captivity feeling cut off from God. As Craig Barnes says, “they lived with a sadness that ran down to their bones.”² Their hopes are dashed.

Amid this hopelessness God intervenes. God summons Ezekiel, the pastor/prophet to this exiled group, this banished nation during the last struggle against Babylon. He was the preacher to a beaten down people. Saying the hard things. Delivering God's message to a people who didn't want to hear it. This period of exile friends, this bondage, separation from home. **This is the valley of dry bones.** Bones, lives, hopes and dreams laying waste, uncovered, exposed, disinterred, scattered, symbolizing the desperation of this nation. Naming that the bones are dry, signals to us certain death. There is no marrow in these bones. This seems to be a place for paleontologists, not prophets. But maybe a prophet will do because Ezekiel wasn't in a literal valley of dry bones. This was a dramatic vision that the Spirit of God had given him.

God asks Ezekiel “Mortal, can these bones live?” Ezekiel knows death when he sees it.

¹ Miroslav Volf, “Not Optimistic,” Christian Century December 26, 2004, 31.

² Craig Barnes, “Resurrected Hopes (Ezekiel 37:1-14; Romans 8:6-11)” *Religion Online*, <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=2247>

(IT'S NOT LOOKING GOOD)

One of the most painful things that we human beings endure is when we are summoned to a crisis – an emergency – and we arrive too late. I can imagine Ezekiel looking around for signs of life. “Can these bones live? I don’t know God. It ain’t looking good. Looks like we got here too late. The people have already lost hope. Dry bones. The people have already found other priorities. Dry bones. The people have already given up. Dry bones. They’ve stopped caring about one another. I don’t know. We got here too late. There’s only dry bones!”

Sisters and brothers we know what Ezekiel is talking about! How do we respond when we are summoned by the Holy One to look closely at our lives, our families, our communities, our nation and world? How do we respond? Right about here we understand Ezekiel’s response. For we too can say...I DON’T KNOW GOD! CAN THESE BONES LIVE? I DON’T KNOW! ONLY YOU KNOW, BECAUSE FROM WHERE I’M STANDING? IT’S NOT LOOKING GOOD!

--We’ve got politicians playing with folks’ lives, forgetting that the Preamble to our Constitution begins – “we the people.” Dry bones.

--U.S. military troops are on their way back to Iraq. Dry bones.

--We’re still fighting over whether folks should have healthcare. Dry bones.

--We all laid our heads down the other night and woke up to the erosion of women’s rights from the highest court in the land! God it ain’t looking good. Dry bones.

(TOO LATE AND TOO FAR GONE)

Too late! Too far gone! Dried up bones – look like Ezekiel and God got there too late. Arrived too late for your situation. They’re still cutting folks pay. It’s too late. The love in your relationship has already dried up. It’s too late. The medical test already came back positive. It’s too late. Military officers have already rung the doorbell with the horrible news of the demise of a son or daughter in Afghanistan. TOO LATE!! IS THERE ANY LIFE IN MY CIRCUMSTANCES? CAN THESE BONES LIVE AGAIN? IT SEEMS TOO LATE. I DON’T KNOW GOD, ONLY YOU KNOW THAT!

(SPEAK A DARING WORD)

AND INDEED GOD KNOWS. That’s why God says to Ezekiel – speak to the bones. In other words, speak God’s word to those whose souls have withered. Speak to those who are breathing but not authentically living. Speak to the bones and say this...Dry bones, listen to what the Lord is saying to you, “I, the Lord God, will put breath in you, and once again you will live. I will wrap you with muscles and skin and breathe life into you. Then you will know that I am the Lord.”

“God tells Ezekiel to speak a daring new word to the bones.”³ Sometimes life comes at us with the kinds of challenging, difficult and even painful circumstances that require a daring and courageous response; a response of faith that makes others think you’re crazy. Know what I’m talking about? I’m talking about in my weakness, speaking a word of strength. “So we will take our stand beside Ezekiel and proclaim our hope to the dry bones, ‘[Hear the word of the Lord], I will cause breath to enter you and you shall live!’ *You* who gave up hope, who gave up dreaming

³ Edwin Searcy “Ezekiel,” in Richard J. Foster, ed., *Renovaré: The Life with God Bible, New Revised Standard Version with the Deuterocanonical Books*. (New York, NY: Harper One, 2005), 1228.

– who [believe that this is as good as it gets for you. **You** who think your best years are behind you. **You** who think the Lord God has forgotten all about your...life.”⁴

Sometimes this daring, bold, caring and courageous word is enough to raise HOPE in the lives of those...

- Feeling depressed
- Struggling to pay your bills
- Lacking joy in your life
- Consumed with worry
- Trying to grow in their career
- Grieving a deep loss
- Brokenhearted
- You have a vision but you can't get it off the ground
- Those living on the frontlines of violence day to day

See, the truth of the matter is...our dead and decaying conditions are not beyond the power of God, because what we must understand is that even death is not final to the Creator. We know this in the work of God through Jesus the Christ, our Risen Lord. Death obeys God. The Children of Israel were devoid of God's Spirit. Oh yeah, they had physical life, but they were the walking dead. And sometimes...so are we. I don't know what's dead in your life. Let us search our own hearts. Be ready for God's intervention and have a spirit of expectation. Be ready to hear God's daring word echoing within you, because God is still speaking through me and through you!

And when God speaks!

The lie that you are a nobody or that you are less than cannot stand. I hear the psalmist saying that we are fearfully and wonderfully made.

When God speaks through you and me!

We can silence the mental chatter that tells us that we will always be bound by addiction.

When God speaks through you and me!

We can silence the mental chatter that tells us we are only worthy of relationships that do not honor us.

When God speaks through you and me!

We get some clarity about our fear-based lives and politics. For we have made enemies out of those who don't look like us – who don't live like us – who don't love like us – who don't worship like us and those whose politics differ from ours.

⁴ Craig Barnes, “Resurrected Hopes (Ezekiel 37:1-14; Romans 8:6-11)” *Religion Online*, <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=2247>

When God speaks through you and me!

We are challenged to face the ways in which we sometimes spiritualize the suffering of others. We can no longer say to the hungry and poor; we can no longer say to the 48 million suffering from hunger and the 35 million food-insecure homes right here in the U.S. “we’re praying for you.” And when we *do* pray, may this Latin American prayer guide us... “To those who hunger, give bread; to those who have bread, give hunger for justice.”

When God speaks through you and me!

Your grieving spirit and your broken heart both have God’s attention. For I hear the Word saying that the Lord is near to the brokenhearted.

When God speaks through you and me!

We resurrect the memory of God’s intention for God’s world, that we feed one another – so no one goes hungry; that we visit the sick and imprisoned – so no one would be lonely; that we set the captive free – because God has decreed our freedom.

When God speaks through you and me!

We’ve got to listen to the cries of the thousands upon thousands of immigrants seeking sanctuary.

When God speaks!

We are no longer dead to the needs of others – we are resurrected from selfishness because we now know the truth. WE. NEED. EACH. OTHER. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King says it so well. “No individual can live alone, no nation can live alone, and anyone who feels that he or she can live alone is sleeping through a revolution. The world in which we live is geographically one. It really boils down to this: all of life is interrelated. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied into a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly...I cannot be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be.”

Ya see, we are resurrection people; we’re getting up from our dead places. I know it seems sometimes that we are too far-gone. But God is always in a struggle for life and has commanded that we love one another in the process! And I’m not talking about the casual clichéd. I’m talking about that love that is more than a feeling. I’m talking about agape love – redemptive goodwill for all humankind. With that kind of love we make haste to stand with the prophet in the valley of dry bones.

(CALL ON THE BREATH)

When Ezekiel spoke to the dry bones, he heard a rattling as bone began connecting to bone. But there was still no life. Life came when he called on the breath. Speaking to the four winds, Ezekiel said “The Lord God commands you to blow from every direction and to breathe life into these dead bodies, so they can live again.” The wind, which is the breath, the Ruach, the Spirit of God blew among the bodies and they came to life and they stood up as a vast multitude.

And they did so without the medical technology in our best trauma units. They did so without Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Oh yeah, my iPad, Kindle, iPhone 5 and Samsung were not needed. I know that we have information at our fingertips. We have new 21st century

vocabularies. Google is a verb now. Breaking global news, not just on our televisions at home, but on our phones and pads in our pockets and purses. And many of these things have become necessities in our lives. We live dot.com lives now. And that's alright, as long as we have the proper perspective. As much as these advances have become necessities, they still have their place – a place to complement our lives, not control them.

(WHAT WE NEED IS HERE)

Why is this important preacher? Ya see, it turns out that Wendell Berry is right. Indeed! What we need is here! (*Pointing to self*) And “HERE, is not the insularity of our comfortable communities. Here, is not my lofty position in the academy or my degrees. What we need is here, but the “here” we speak of is much bigger than that.”⁵ The “Here” we speak of is life – life that comes through the breath of our Creator. Friends, it turns out that we have what we need.

God called on Ezekiel to use what he already had. And God calls on us to use what we already have. As the theologian John McClure says, “God instructs us to speak God’s word directly to the dry bones of death all around us, trusting that through our ministries [including this amazing ministry here at Rensselaerville Presbyterian] the Spirit can bring life to the dead bones in our social worlds.”⁶ We’re called to open our mouths and speak a daring and courageous word AND breathe on the bones/give spirit breath to the dead and death dealing in the world. We have what we need.

(SPIRIT INDWELLS US)

Scripture asks the question – “know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit and the spirit of God dwells in you?” Yeah, it turns out that we don’t have to go outside of ourselves to satisfy our greatest and deepest needs. It turns out that we are **already** on holy ground. The Holy life-giving Spirit of God is already on the premises of our soul and is at work in us – praying in us and for us. The Apostle Paul tells us in his epistle to the Romans. ²⁶Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, **but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.** ²⁷And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. The theologian, Marjorie Thompson asks the question, “have you considered what an astonishing promise it is that the spirit prays in us, and does so according to the will of God? And “when [our problems/concerns/needs] overwhelm us, the Spirit is there to carry our burdens for us interceding with God on our behalf. The spirit knows both what we need and what God’s will is for us.”⁷ And that same spirit gives us power – power to give and sustain life.

(CPR)

In emergency scenarios where someone is literally struggling to live, I’m always struck by what one sacrifices to administer Cardiopulmonary Resuscitation – CPR. We Americans – we

⁵ Peter Bailey, email message to author, July 2, 2014.

⁶ John S. McClure, “Day of Pentecost,” in Ronald J. Allen, Dale P. Andrews and Dawn Ottoni-Wilhelm, eds., *Preaching God’s Transforming Justice, A Lectionary Commentary, Year B* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 255.

⁷ Marjorie J. Thompson, *Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 31.

westerners value our personal space. When someone is struggling to live, whatever the “space” decorum is, it all goes out of the window for the one administering CPR. It’s hands on. The one administering is fully present. Again, I’m further amazed at how with all of the medical technology and advances there are some situations where all that is needed and all that is available is our breath. Sometimes there isn’t an ambulance or emergency service, that can get to a situation fast enough to sustain life. When someone is struggling to live, our throwing money at the problem is not enough. In those life or death moments, we can’t stand at a distance. The one trained in CPR cannot simply wish better health onto the person. He/she must come close. Face to face, body to body. It’s interesting to me that they breathe into the body and then they listen. They listen for the breath.

(BREATHE AND LISTEN)

--So let us breathe on the outcasts and untouchables, and listen to their stories.

--Breathe on our Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgendered, Queer and Questioning sisters and brothers who are fighting for human rights and listen to their struggles.

--Breathe on the prison industrial complex, which overwhelmingly houses African American men and women, many who have committed non-violent crimes and listen to their sorrow.

Come close and breathe. God calls us to come close. God called Ezekiel to stand in the midst of the dry bones. And God is preparing and empowering us to speak a daring, courageous and often risky word. Sometimes there’s no time to call on someone else. Sometimes the universe skips over the expert and taps you and me to speaking that daring word. To breathe life. Sometimes we’re living our lives and minding our own business and the spirit calls our names in the face of death dealing and injustice.

We have what we need. God called Ezekiel to use what he already had – speak a daring word. We have a voice. We have a right to life. Speak. Breathe. Just breathe! The spirit of God indwells us.

(END)

Often we cry out to God “is there any hope? Are you gonna do anything? Are we going to make it? Can these bones live?” And it’s so interesting that God asks the same questions of *us*! “Are you gonna do anything? Can these bones live?”

Friends, are we willing to place our trust in God’s saving power? “Where are the dry bones today, where is the valley of death that needs to hear the promise of the living God?”

Sometimes things are so far gone that we feel we have to scrap it and start over again. Our Creator showed us something in this text and Wendell Berry affirmed it saying, “We pray, not for new earth or heaven...what we need is here.” Be quiet in heart so that we can harness the energy to speak a daring word. Be clear in eye so that we can see what we have and use it to breathe life back into this human condition. It turns out that we have what we need and we can start right where we are. JUST BREATHE.

God bless you.