



“DANCING BONES AND NEW BEGINNINGS”

SCRIPTURE: EZEKIEL 37:1-14

GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC

Sunday, May 19, 2024, Pentecost

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Ezekiel 37:1-14

37:1 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. 37:2 He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. 37:3 He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord GOD, you know." 37:4 Then he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD. 37:5 Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. 37:6 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."

37:7 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. 37:8 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. 37:9 Then God said to me, "Prophecy 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." 37:10 I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude. 37:11 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.' 37:12 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. 37:13 And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. 37:14 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.

The Word of the LORD

Thanks be to God

There are many reasons why this text is a fan favorite when it comes to the Book of Ezekiel. But the biggest one is that most of the book is really harsh and hard hitting. Ezekiel was a priest's kid. Probably studying to be a priest himself when the Babylonian deportation from Judah began. He was a part of the systematic removal of people from their land by the Babylonian Empire.

Ezekiel was pretty eccentric even by prophetic standards. He saw strange visions, obsessed over bodily functions, and may have sounded like a broken record that no one wanted to listen to—and the tune he was stuck on is: you people are unfaithful and God is sick and tired of it.

Many people resisted and rejected Ezekiel's message. We can understand why, can't we?

Many people were deported during the Babylonian occupation—especially the leaders, the intellectual elite, the artisans, the teachers, the warriors. And not everyone experienced exile the same. As in any colonizing effort there is chaos, there is violence, and a wearing down of the people's connections, culture, and spirit.

And there are people who maintain resistance and there are people who assimilate. And there are people who do some of both. These are all survival skills.

Some people are deeply traumatized because they saw loved ones die, or they were violently subdued, or because of root shock—the loss of one's homeland and the loss of one's connection to the land, the loss of one's center of gravity and orientation to the world through land and location.

Ezekiel's message was extra hard in the midst of exile because it was that the people had brought all this suffering on themselves and that God is in control of the ways nations rise and fall. That's a tough message for an exiled people.

Ezekiel was unwavering in his understanding of God's sovereignty. And he wasn't going to let the fact that things weren't working out the way God had promised reflect poorly on God. He was going to put the blame where it belonged in his eyes—and he believed blame belonged on the unfaithful people—they broke their part of the promise, they were unfaithful. God had kept up God's end of the covenant, but the people hadn't, so all this calamity is the punishment of a wrathful, angry, fed up God.

Ezekiel's main point is that orthodox understandings of chosenness, entitlement to land, the staying power of the Davidic dynasty, and the centrality of Solomon's temple—all of

these things were crumbling because of the people's unfaithfulness. So, those were not the things to cling to—these 4 parts of God's promises in the covenant with the people.

Ezekiel also railed against the occupiers and oppressors at times. But his big concern was how the people violated their covenant responsibilities, and so God was fed up.

So that's most of the chapters in this book. There is sorrow, there is privation, there is anger, there is shaming and blaming, and there is resignation—this is our plight.

Then you get to chapter 37 and Ezekiel is sharing his vision of restoration— the valley of the dry bones.

God walks Ezekiel through this valley full of bones left to rot in the sun—a sea of bones that had not had proper burial, beyond dead from a long ago humiliation, from withering violence and deprivation, the flesh long gone, the muscle fibers and ligaments long gone. All that is left of a vanquished people are dry bones. And God asks Ezekiel—mortal, can these bones live?

And Ezekiel answers with a version of “you're asking me?! God, you know whether that can happen or not. Not me!”

Then God tells Ezekiel to prophesy to the bones. God doesn't just do it, God tells Ezekiel to tell the bones that God is going to do it. Tell the bones that I will give them life, God says to Ezekiel—skin and muscle fibers and ligaments, tell them they will live.

Ezekiel prophesies and this valley of dry bones begins to move and rattle and be revived—the valley of death begins to be filled with life. Then God tells Ezekiel to prophesy and call to the winds of the four directions that fill these bones with breath. And the bones stood a vast multitude, breathing, moving, alive!

Then God gives Ezekiel the words of restoration—when the people think all is lost, God's promise of repair comes to them. Not only will you live, but you will live on your own soil. You will go home again.

This vision of restoration is one to hold on to in a time of exile, when it feels like all is lost. So, of course, these verses are everyone's favorite part of Ezekiel. And that's why it is included in the lectionary on days like Pentecost—this day when we celebrate the power of the Holy Spirit to birth the church in the crowded streets of Jerusalem by giving grieving Jesus' followers the capacity to speak in all the languages of the world around them.

The good news is that God acts, God adapts, God is tangled up with human life and finds ways to create home and belonging from exile, hope and holy imagination even in privation, loss, and despair.

If you dig down into the ground of Ezekiel's message—it is that God responds to unfaithfulness with accountability, and God can regenerate and restore when all we see is death and loss. To get there you have to dig through a lot of problematic theology that lots of Christians trade in still today—that when bad things happen, it is punishment for unfaithfulness, it is the wage of sin and disobedience.

Think of Ezekiel as someone who could see things that others could not, but also think of him as a combination of a harsh inner critic and a protector. He is protecting God's reputation in his own special way—he is clear that the people's defeat does not equal God's defeat. You can understand why that hard line would be important in a time of such cultural, political, and existential upheaval. They can take everything else, but don't let them take God.

Some in exile held on to their belief in chosenness, but Ezekiel pushes back against clinging to chosenness and is focused more on clinging to God's sovereignty.

Fast forward to today and neither chosenness, nor sovereignty really hold up very well in our historical moment.

Chosenness has led to all sorts of problems—from conquest to genocide in many different cultural contexts to the current dangers we are facing in our country with white Christian Nationalism.

And God's sovereignty, well it got twisted up with a view of power as domination and control. God's sovereignty has not aged well as a way to understand the ways nations rise and fall, conquer and are colonized. This view of sovereignty is a concept that is less and less compelling to people as we learn more and more about how the world actually works.

As we see how domination and control have their limitations and create much suffering—and how they leave us with a God who is cruel and nefarious—and seems to be more a reflection of human pride and abuse of power than anything divine that can save us.

So, the valley of the dry bones for us today is not just about the regeneration of human community, but of God godself.

What do we believe? How is God alive in our aliveness? How is God present in our loss, in oppression, in our encounters with evil and with despair?

When I wrote my first book, “Let the Bones Dance: Embodiment and the Body of Christ” this Ezekiel passage is where I started. This passage met me in a time of embodied contradiction. It was 1999, I was pregnant and I was bedridden, gestating new life, but literally feeling like death because of *hyperemesis gravidarum*. That’s when pregnancy makes you so sick that you experience extreme nausea and vomiting for the whole pregnancy, not just for the first trimester.

So, I was supposed to be writing my dissertation for my PhD, but instead all I could do was lie still in my bed and try to sleep to make the nausea subside. I could not read, write, walk, run, or even do much talking. We had just moved to Chicago for John to coach for the Chicago Bears and I knew no one. It was a lonely, difficult time.

It was during this time of stillness and aloneness—when I felt so sick, but was at the same time growing a healthy baby inside me—that this vision of the dry bones coming to life was something I could see anew.

And the vision God gave me was about my body and our bodies and the church, the collective body, the Body of Christ—and the ways we are made for healing. It is hard to put into words the deep healing that I have been experiencing and metabolizing in my life since then. As soon as I could write again, that is when I started writing poetry and practicing centering prayer and breath prayer because complete sentences and words are only a tiny fraction of how our bodies live and speak truth.

Trauma theory was just becoming a field of study during that time during my doctoral studies. Women’s bodies were largely ignored in theological study, and the body itself in the tradition that formed me was more often seen as a liability than a spiritual gift. This was the problem God called me to speak into during that time.

The body was reviled and ignored in my experience of church—and as a body traumatized by sexual violence and an utter lack of unacknowledgement and protection, I was increasingly done with the faith that had formed me. Going to church often felt like a valley of dry bones a lot of the time—dead, empty, and with a deafening quiet around the truth of our bodies—and the real cellular connections that give us life.

And the PCUSA was in decline—congregations aging, shrinking, closing, atrophying. Other congregations were doubling down on oppressive beliefs and leaving the denomination because they could not tolerate the ordination and full blessing of LGBTQIA+ people.

And racial justice was talked about like a thing the world out there did that the church gave lip service to, but the PCUSA and our leadership was almost completely white in terms of the bodies in charge, and 100% white in terms of the culture of our polity and practice. And talk about church vitality or revitalization pretty much no attention to how the culture of white supremacy was why the denomination was dying.

My body wrote my book over twenty years ago when I could not read or write a word. And our life together continues to tell the story of how God breathes life and vitality and movement into places where there is stagnation, death, and homeostasis.

If you take out the last few lines about the soil in these verses in Ezekiel, this passage is not about restoration at all, but it is about a new beginning—life folding out of death, breath bringing life to a pervasive deadness, and movement and aliveness emerging from years and years of stagnation.

The last lines in the passage bring back in the idea of chosenness and entitlement to land. I get why the people needed to hear those things. I also pray that we as a human family can finally lay down the oppressive concepts of chosenness and entitlement to territory.

What if our birthright is not about place at all, but about right relationship with whatever our surroundings are, right relationship with death itself, and right relationship with a mysterious God who we barely know?

What if God's instrument of sovereignty is love, not might—love that liberates and breathes and finds ways for dead bones to dance into a new day—seasoned and wise, humble and hopeful, and finally trusting in a God who doesn't promise us we will rule the world, but who reminds us that we take our place among all the creatures of this world, not as superior, but as one with the gift of self-reflection, God reminds us that were made to heal, that we can find our place in the world in ways that do not bring devastation and death.

Beginning in June when Ordinary Time gets underway in the church year this summer, we will be slowing down together to notice how God is moving at GCPC in our worship. During worship we will explore what, why, and how we are practicing and experiencing mutual liberation together with curiosity. Why are we practicing what we are practicing? What is it like for you? Where are the healing opportunities? Where is God breathing new life where we might struggle to see anything by loss and death?

We will practice strengthening trust muscles.

And we will practice returning to sacred breath again and again.

We will savor where we are and how God is here. We will acknowledge our new beginnings.

So here's to dancing bones and new beginnings, Grace Covenant. I can't think of a time when Pentecost felt more real to me than in these days of building beloved community with you.

Happy Pentecost! And come Holy Spirit!

Thanks be to God.